

Episode One-and-a-Half

by MrsHamill

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Summary: Explores what SHOULD happen between Eeps 1 and 2, but probably won't

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> <meta name="Generator"> The only light in the tower room came from the pyre

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By MrsHamill thamill@mgfairfax.rr.com

Archive: By StarWarsChicks and FanFiction.net, all others please ask.

Rating: R

Warnings: Adult content and situations.

Spoilers: MAJOR for TPM, but we've all seen it, right?

Summary: Picks up exactly at the ending of TPM. A possible continuation, what actually should happen between Episodes One and Two (but probably won't)

Disclaimers: The usual stuff applies, George can sue the life out of me if he wants, ya can't get blood from a turnip.

Notes: This is a story written last summer that I wanted to give a wider audience to. It is VERY long so be aware of that. This is my way of exploring why George never put any female Jedi anywhere until Title IX made him.

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The only light in the tower room came from the pyre. Those gathered around it watched in silence and grief as the fire consumed the

beloved form of the Jedi master, Qui-Gon Jinn. Jedi Mace Windu stood at the back, leaning on a window frame. Thoughtfully, he regarded his friend Yoda, who stood on the window sill almost eye to eye with him.

"There's no doubt the mysterious warrior was a Sith," he said quietly.

"Always two there are," Yoda said thoughtfully, "â€|no more, no less. A master and an apprentice."

"But which was destroyed?" Mace asked. "The master, or the apprentice?"

Yoda had no answer to that. Both Jedi avoided looked at each other, neither liking the thoughts of the other.

After the grand procession to honor the Gungan heroes, Yoda met again with Mace and other members of the council in an unofficial session. They were staying on Naboo for the time being, partially in a show of solidarity to the young queen, partially out of respect, and partially because few of them really wanted to go back to Coruscant. The city-planet was in turmoil, between the deposing of the trade confederation, the election of Palpatine to his new rank, and the thorough housecleaning the bureaucracy expected from that election. In a lovely tower room, generously provided by a Queen still caught up in war restoration, Yoda stood at a window and contemplated the spectacular waterfalls of Theed.

"Agreed, we are then. Sith it was."

The members of the council bowed their heads in acknowledgment of Yoda's words. Mace spoke. "Then it was probable that the apprentice was killedâ€| I don't think Obi-Wan could have killed a master without the help of Qui-Gon."

"Help of his Master he had. Yes. Before and after. But agree I doâ€|Sith master does not fight with such weapon as was used. Mind he uses, not weapon."

"Yes. I remember too, old friend." Mace's voice was uncharacteristically soft.

Silence reigned in the room for a few moments, broken only by birdsong and the soft, faraway roar of the waterfalls. Until one looked out the window, it was possible to believe that no war had taken place here. Despite the best efforts of the Naboo, there was still a lot of destruction to rectify. Yoda stayed at the window, as if to remind himself that conflict had, indeed, come even here to this pleasant place.

Finally, he heaved a large sigh and turned to his friends and compatriots. "Sith it was. Yes. Thenâ€| help we need. Time it is, to call her back."

There were rustlings around the group, and Ki protested. "But that's hardly fair. Shouldn't we try first to find out who it is?"

"And just how do you propose to do that, Ki?" Mace asked. "There's only one person alive today who can detect a Sith. I agree with

Yodaâ€œ I don't like to do it, but we need her."

When Saesee Tiin spoke, it was always softly. But it's voice was always listened to since it was so rare to hear words from it. "Yes. We must fetch her here. The paths converge on this place, on us, on the one who may be the chosen one and his master. You, Yoda, and you, Mace, must go to her, and take with you Obi-Wan."

Such a long speech was so rare that many members of the council were dumbfounded and it was a while before anyone else spoke. "Leave we will, then. Tonight, it will be."

Obi-Wan was less than happy about leaving his Padawan, who was also less than happy at being left behind. Amidala and Ki Mundi promised to look after Anakin during his absence, and Ki was already beginning to load Ani down with books and practices as Obi-Wan boarded the small starship loaned to the council by Amidala.

"Tell me again where we're going?" he asked, still a bit disgruntled over the whole affair. Mace had gone forward to the bridge which left Obi-Wan alone with Yoda to get the latter settled.

Yoda could feel the young Knight's perplexity as he allowed himself to be placed on a comfortable couch. He never did like space travel, and probably never would. After settling himself as best he was able, he motioned Obi-Wan to sit before him.

"Go we must to see Jedi Lord Acleisst. Great in the Force, is Acleisst. Fought in last Sith battle, yes."

"But I don't understand, Master Yoda. If this Lord Acleisst is so great, why then isn't he on the council?"

"Exile it was. Yes. Voluntary. Long story, it is. Very sad. Many great Jedi died last time Sith rose." Yoda's ears drooped, as did his eyelids, and he sighed. "Acleisst is last to know Sith, can feel Sith. Sith can hide from Jedi, hide in plain sight, they can. Always two there areâ€œ Qui-Gon, and you, fought with the apprentice. Acleisst fought with the master."

With his walking stick, Yoda poked at Obi-Wan. "Do you good, young Knight, to know Jedi not invincible. Killed we can be, and killed we are. But death, no, death is not the end." Yoda sighed again, as he felt the acceleration. "Sleep now, I will. You do too."

Obi-Wan smiled and shook his head. He was used to the pronouncements of this Jedi Master and knew it would do him no more good to pump for more information. He went, instead, forward to talk to Mace.

Mace was in the control room, sitting behind the pilot and staring thoughtfully through the force field at the star tracks. He looked up as Obi-Wan entered the room. "Yoda settled, then?" he asked.

"Yes. Not comfortably, I imagine, though." They both smiled at that; Yoda's discomfort at space travel was legendary. Obi-Wan leaned on the back of Mace's chair. "Master, Yoda just told me that many of us died the last time the Sith rose. How did that happen?"

The dark man looked up at Obi-Wan and smiled slightly. "Mace, son, you've earned the right to call me that at the least. And yes, Yoda

told you true. We lost 15 from the Knighthood that day, all good, strong Jedi. We don't need that happening again, which is why we're going to see Acleisst."

"And this Acleisst, Yoda said was exiled?"

"It was voluntary." Mace paused and turned back to his contemplation of the star tracks. "The battle was beyond horrific, Obi-Wan. I was severely wounded and so missed some of the worst fighting, but Acleisst took out the Master; then left. You'll understand better once we get to Trienec, where Acleisst lives now."

Obi-Wan was not exactly satisfied with this answer, but realized that he would not get much more out of Mace and was reluctant to push. It was quite apparent to him that Mace did not want to talk about the event, and indeed, found it painful to even tell him the little he did. The new Knight sighed to himself, and resigned himself to waiting.

Trienec took a bit of getting to. It was a remote, unpopulated, blue-green planet. Most of it was oceans, seas, or swampy lowlands, teeming with life. Two small mountain ranges, along the equator, comprised the bulk of dry land. It's sun was a cool yellow older star, and the planet itself was so old as to be quite geologically stable. It and it's two small moons orbited close in; the system only had two other planets, a small, burned cinder and a gas giant further out.

Using the Force as a guide, Mace had the pilot set down on one of the small mountainous islands near the equator. The hatch opened and the green, growing smell of riotous life immediately invaded the entire ship.

Neither Yoda nor Mace showed any inclination to disembark, which puzzled Obi-Wan. "Waiting, we are, for an invitation," Yoda explained, sitting at the bottom of the ramp from the ship. "Acleisst knows we're here," Mace further explained.

The ship had landed near dark, local time, and the expected "invitation" did not come before full dark fell. The three Jedi waited, in varying degrees of patience, until morning, then Yoda calmly walked out of the hatch and into the nearby trees.

A short distance from the ship was a small, lovely lake; surrounded by low grasses and flowers the water was perfectly clear and calm, and reflected the light blue of the sky above it. Yoda stood admiring the small lake for a moment before sitting down on a smallish rock near the water's edge. To his right, nestled amid the trees, he could see a small pre-fab house. Before him, he noted several otter-like creatures frolicking in the water and one human. Sighing, he leaned his hands and chin on his stick and waited patiently.

From time to time, as he sat there, one or more of the animals would approach and stare at him curiously. He heard their chittering as they apparently discussed him between themselves. The human never came any closer to him than half the lake's width.

Yoda had waited some hours and the sun was approaching zenith before anything changed. Finally, the human swam over near the place on the shore where he sat, and stared at him with thin coldness. Yoda stared

calmly back at the tall woman; her hair was bluish-black, short, and was partially braided; some of the braids were tipped with small chimes that rang with her every movement.. Her smoldering eyes were a rich brownish-gold, and her skin was very nearly the same color. The small otter-like animals hovered near her.

Since she didn't seem inclined to say anything, Yoda broke the silence. "Waiting, I was. Invited, I was not, but welcome am I?"

"I was hoping you'd just go away," she answered. Her voice was low and beautifully accented, modulated as if used to singing or speaking a tonal language. "What do you want, old toad?"

"Can we not discuss inside? Long time it has been. Others are here, too, see you they want, hmmmm?"

The woman in the water before him closed her eyes, then shrugged and rose, throwing her hair back from her eyes. "Fine then. Bring Mace and the other one. I don't care." At that she stalked away towards the house, wrapping a blanket that had been neatly folded near where Yoda sat around her nakedness. Yoda picked up his comm unit and called the ship.

When Mace and Obi-Wan got to Yoda, they found him sitting on a log bench just outside the pre-fab house. The house itself was small and open; it obviously had only two rooms â€“ one in front and the other in back, behind a large, open fireplace â€“ and faintly musical rustling from the back of the house told them an occupant was there. The large, brown, furry creatures ran in and out of the house with complete freedom; some of them carried items in their remarkably hand-like forepaws and others stared at them curiously, not at all afraid.

Finally, the golden-brown woman came out to the front room. She had dressed in a garment made of a soft, bluish cloth that draped her body from her left shoulder to just above her knees. A separate lighter scarf draped around her neck; her feet were bare. Without a word, she approached them and stood over Yoda, her hands on her hips.

"I suppose you're going to insist on hospitality now, too, old toad? Some wine, perhaps?" Her tone left little doubt as to whether she wanted to provide it.

Obi-Wan was taken aback, and started to defend his Master. A glare from the woman and a quick look at Mace's amused face stopped him, however. "Who's the boy? Your Padawan? Aren't you a little old for that, Yoda?" she demanded of the Jedi.

"My Padawan he is not. Qui-Gon's Padawan he was. Required hospitality is not, but accepted it is if offered," mildly replied Yoda.

"Offered it is not," she snapped, but looked at Obi-Wan speculatively. "If Qui-Gon's Padawan he was, then he must be Obi-Wan Kenobi. I know who you are," she said to Mace, smiling sarcastically.

In two quick steps Mace moved to her and for a moment Obi-Wan thought the dark man would attack her. Instead, they embraced fiercely and

kissed each other. "And here I thought you'd be upset to see us," Mace smiled. "It's been a long time, Cless."

"Not long enough, blackheart," she replied softly. "It still hurts."

"It probably always will, dear one. Sit with us, please?"

Shrugging, she nodded her head and arranged herself gracefully on the ground next to Yoda. One of the brown animals immediately came over to her and busily climbed into her lap, chattering excitedly. "Yes, Miki, I know," she murmured to the creature, stroking it into silence. "Now you must let mama-sess talk to the others for a while."

When she looked up from this exchange, her features had lost the hardness, the anger that had been present since he first saw her. Obi-Wan, who had taken a seat next to Yoda, was taken at the luminous beauty and vulnerability revealed there, but was still confused over who she was and how it was she addressed Jedi masters with such familiarity.

"Well, what is it you want then? I'm sure you didn't come all this way just to visit."

Yoda smiled gently at her, but it wasn't a happy smile. "Better reason there is not, hmm? But no, reason we have, and good one it is not. Back are the Sith, Cless."

The woman froze, and for a moment naked emotion — horror, fear, anger — was revealed on her face. The small creature in her lap was apparently concerned at her reaction, and rose to his haunches to pat her face consolingly. His chittering ended on a questioning note.

"I'm sorry, Miki," she whispered to it. "I'm all right." She bowed her head for a moment and her hair chimed softly as it fell before her face. Miki, in her lap, looked at each of the three men in turn, softly growling what was definitely a warning to them. Yoda addressed it directly.

"At ease be, little friend. Harm her we will not. Our friend too, she is."

"No harm, Miki," she said thickly, her head still bowed, "but take me away they will. If the Sith are back that must mean you need my help." She swallowed, but did not look up at Yoda. "You know what this costs me, old toad."

It was Mace who answered that. "Yes, Acleisst, we know what it costs you. But you know what it will cost us, all of us, when the Sith rise again."

Obi-Wan's confusion bubbled over at this, and he could remain silent no longer. "Wait, please, you go too fast for me. This is Lord Acleisst?"

Although his remarks were aimed at Mace and Yoda, it was the woman who responded, jerking her head up to glare at him. "Just Acleisst, pretty boy, I didn't ask for nor do I accept that title. My friends

call me Cless but you may call me Master. Do you have a problem with that?"

"No, no, ma'am, Masterâ€œ! I'm just confused. I think Qui-Gon neglected something in my training, perhaps? Why did I never know about Lo- I mean, Master Acleisst?"

Yoda leaned his chin on his walking stick; his ears drooped and his eyes were downcast. "Told you, I did, on ship. Long time beforeâ€œ! choices were made."

"Because of the horrible outcome of the battle, Acleisst went into voluntary exile, Obi-Wan; all the council appreciated and respected her decisionâ€œ!" Mace said.

"Until now, eh?" the woman's voice was bitter; her face was back down and focused on the animal on her lap. "Now, the council has a panic attack and says "Call Acleisst! The Sith are back!" What if Acleisst refuses to come, refuses to help? Did any of you think of that?"

Yoda stared hard at her, until her head came back up and she reluctantly met his gaze. His voice was uncharacteristically harsh. "Refuse you will not. Jedi you are. Jedi you always will be. Calls the Force, answer you must. Answer must we all."

"I'm _happy_ here, old toad. Please don't make me do this."

"Make you? Fagh. Make you I do not. This you know. This even your friend knows," Yoda replied to her quiet plea, indicating the small animal. It was looking from the women to the men, obviously trying to follow the conversation somehow. "Choices there always are."

"Choices, yes," she whispered, once again dropping her gaze. "Alternatives there often are not." Once again, the animal reached up a paw and caressed her face. It's own face was a mask of sympathy and sorrow. One choked sob escaped her, and she fiercely hugged the animal to her, then released it.

"Very well. Give me a little time to say goodbye. I will meet you at your ship shortly." She looked up sharply then and added, "don't ask me to go to Coruscant. That much I will not do."

Mace answered her. "No, not Coruscant. We're meeting the rest on Naboo."

She nodded. "That's where Qui-Gon died, isn't it. Very well. I'll meet you at the ship."

Without a word, Mace helped Yoda to his feet, and then all three slowly left the woman seated on the ground. Obi-Wan looked back once, to see a convergence of the small creatures on her, all making a kind of keening noise, then he looked away.

Acleisst listened for the last time to the high pitched voices of those she had come to love. Finally, Miki, still on her lap, silenced the troop with a loud whistle, then turned back to her. "Mama-sess, go? Come back, yes?"

"Yes, Miki. Mama-sess go now with others. One doesn't need Mama-sess any more."

A sharp keening met that pronouncement. "No, no, one always need Mama-sess!" Miki echoed that by fiercely nuzzling her neck. She could feel his trembling.

"No. One is grown now. One will do well. Mama-sess will try to come back!"

"Mama-sess will not come back," Miki interrupted softly, plaintively. "One knows this is so. Miki will miss Mama-sess."

Acleisst looked at her friend, astounded by his pronouncement. "One is grown, Miki. Pain always comes with growing. Know that even though Mama-sess is gone, Mama-sess will be here. Here is where Mama-sess's heart is. Do you understand, little one?"

Miki's face twisted up in an agony of thought. "One has some knowing. Mama-sess will take some of Miki too. This is so. If Mama-sess takes some of Miki, then some of Mama-sess will stay with Miki. This is also so."

Acleisst forced the tears away from her eyes. She knew if she cried, the others would fall apart, and that she felt she couldn't take. Reaching out her arms, she hugged as many of her friends to her as she could, stroking soft fur, murmuring in tiny ears and kissing whiskered faces. Then, reluctantly, she stood and pulled her scarf up around her head. With one long glance back at her home, she walked away. She did not look back as a keening wail rose behind her.

**

PART TWO

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On the journey back to Naboo, Obi-Wan caught himself watching her, frequently, to such extent that he finally forced himself forward to escape her presence. Ruthlessly he wrenched his mind into the calming patterns and disciplines, only to find himself once more dwelling on her eyes. He gave up in disgust finally, and went to find something to eat and a cube or book to take his mind off of everything. He missed Qui-Gon desperately, and wished his master were present to help him through this time.

She was sitting at one of the two small tables in the wardroom, picking over some rations, when he entered. His first thought was to flee, which was senseless. Instead, he got himself some rations and sat down as far away from her as he could, in order (or so he told himself) to not disturb her. If she felt his discomfiture, she gave no sign.

After some time of this strained silence, he felt eyes upon him so he looked up. She was staring at him in a rather speculative fashion, but her face was still a mask of sorrow.

"I'm afraid I'm rather poor company, pretty boy," she said with just a hint of irony, "and for that I apologize. You needn't walk on

eggshells around me. The only one I might bite would be Yoda, and he'll always bite back."

He smiled slightly, and looked back down at his food. "That's all right, Master, I think I understand a bit of what is happening. But I'm still confused."

She rolled her eyes and half-smiled. "Cless, boy, call me Cless. I was upset with Yoda and I took it out on you. I'm sorry." Her smile turned wry. "And if you're confused, I don't doubt it. You were, after all, Qui-Gon's Padawan. He spent most of his life trying to confuse people, with great success."

He frowned. "Mastâ€| I mean, Cless, I've been meaning to ask you, how did you know my Master hadâ€| died? I saw no communications equipment at your house."

She looked away again. "No, and no such equipment I wanted. Qui-Gon came to me told me some of what happened. He didn't know the creature you and he fought was a Sith, though. He asked meâ€| before he crossed overâ€| to help look after the boy. I thought he meant you? But seeing you now, I don't believe that's right."

Obi-Wan blinked. This was just getting stranger and strangerâ€| he knew that sometimes Jedi could astral-project, but why would Qui-Gon go to someone he had never told his Padawan about? "No, no, I think he must have meant Anakin. You'll meet him when we get to Naboo. My Master believed him to be the "chosen one," although I'm not entirely sure what that means."

Her eyebrows rose and her mouth turned up in a grimace. "Oh dear. Qui-Gon was always taken with prophecy. The Chosen One, eh? The one who "will bring balance to the Force." You are not the only one to wonder what that means. Prophecy is a two edged sword, Obi-Wan, and often can only be interpreted after events have taken place. That's why I never much stood by it. At least, that's what I tell myself." This last was said quietly, almost to herself, and Obi-Wan could feel a surge of something â€“ pain? â€“ that was viciously squashed. "I look forward to meeting Anakin. Whose Padawan is he to be?"

Obi-Wan smiled, a bit with pride, and a bit with trepidation. "Yoda has allowed me to take him on as my first Padawan."

Her eyes widened. "You're a bit young for that honor, aren't you? Especially for one that Qui-Gon thought so much of. Are you sure you're ready?"

Obi-Wan astonished himself by answering her truthfully. "No, I'm not sure. I told Yoda I was ready, and my Master made me promise to train Anakin. But sometimes, sometimes I wonder if I've done the right thing. And to be more honest, it surprises me that I can admit that to anyone, let alone myself!"

Acleisst threw her head back and laughed at this. "An honest Jedi. Now there's a rare beast! Qui-Gon has taught you well, Obi-Wan. You are a decent man, and make a good Jedi."

Unaccountably, his heart swelled at her words and her laughter. Her face was so transformed by the mirth, and a small voice in the back of his head told him he wanted to hear that laughter forever. Once

again he surprised himself. "Master Acleisst, I would be honored if you would help me train Anakin. Apparently, that is what Qui-Gon wanted. Perhaps that is the true reason you are being called back."

Her face sobered at this speech, and she chewed on one lip as she evaluated him. She saw a young, fair, quite handsome man, blonde hair short except for a braided bit over his right ear setting off his gray eyes, and all eager to conquer evil in the name of the Force. Despite his recent sorrow, she saw so much liveliness, so much sheer _energy_ in him that he almost awed her. It had been a long, long time since she had felt such innocent power and pure strength of purpose. "I don'tâ€| um." She paused and chose her words. "I'm honored by your request Jedi, but let's wait until we get to Naboo. Many things will have to be decided once we arrive. I've learned from experience that it's never a good thing to make too many plansâ€| real life has a terrible habit of interfering at the wrong time."

He smiled at this, but for some reason felt his face flush. This was getting ridiculous, he thought. He was about to excuse himself when she spoke again. "Tell me, why did Qui-Gon think this boy was the chosen one?"

Obi-Wan blinked at her for a moment, trying to get his mind to focus and back on track. "Well, it was on Tatooine, where we met Anakin. Both of us felt a disturbance in the Force, but it was very, well, nebulous. Qui-Gon suspected there was something with the boy, and the boy's mother confirmed it. When he sent me a blood sample to analyze, the mitochondrion level was off the scale. I've never seen such a thingâ€| something like over 20,000."

He shook his head, remembering, and feeling anew the pain of his Master's passing. "When my Master took the boy to the council, they all agreed that he was talented, and very powerful. But his age!â€| he's nearly ten. Mace and Yoda agreed he was too old to be trained, and my Master defied them and said he would train Anakin anyway."

"Well, how typical Qui-Gon," said Acleisst, smiling gently. "Go on, please. I don't mean to denigrate your Master, but I knew him well."

Obi-Wan smiled sadly at her, and said "yes, you're right, it was quite typical of my Master to go directly against the wishes of the council. And even I agreed with the council this timeâ€| the boy is dangerous. I'm not sure why Qui-Gon felt so strongly about him. Anakin is basically a good child, willing to learn even though he's headstrong and proud. But his strength is so raw, power in the Force so untamed, that it frightens me sometimes. It will be those times when I miss my Master most."

The lump in his throat â€" the one he thought he had banished after the funeral pyre â€" came back and it took him a moment to swallow it down again. When he did, he found Acleisst sitting next to him at the small table. "I'm sorry, Obi-Wan. I did not mean to call up the pain again. Qui-Gon was a good man, he loved you very much and thought very highly of you. As long as you remember him, he will always be with you."

With this, she reached out her hand and laid it on top of his in a

gesture of comfort. However, at the touch, both of them felt an almost electric shock course through their bodies. Stunned, Obi-Wan looked up into her face and when their eyes met, he fell headlong into a golden-brown vortex unlike anything he had ever experienced before.

Distantly, he heard her gasp, and suddenly the physical connection was severed as she wrenched her hand away from his. When he was able to focus again, he noted her face reflected the turmoil in her mind; turmoil that was matched in his own body and mind. She half stood, knocking her chair over and stumbling back away from him and the table, her eyes wide and her hands pressed against her flaming face. Something was wrong with this tongue; he wanted to apologize (for what?) or reassure her (or kiss her!) now where did that come from? but he was completely incapable of any speech.

A noise at the door caused them to turn; it was Mace, his mouth open, his eyes reflecting shock and puzzlement at the disturbance in their auras. "What is going on here?" He demanded. "I was just on my way to tell you we're coming out of hyperspace to Naboo. You two are causing enough convergence to be felt half way to Kessel. Are you all right?"

Looking at the familiar form of Mace Windu rather than the beautiful woman in front of him helped Obi-Wan collect his thoughts and get his mind under control. He started to speak, but Acleisst beat him to it. "Fine. I'm fine. We're fine, Mace. I need to see to Yoda." She fled the room quickly enough to cause a sonic boom.

Mace turned to watch her out of the room, then turned back to Obi-Wan in puzzlement. "What just happened?"

Obi-Wan shook his head, as much to clear it as to answer his friend. "Iâ€œ I don't exactly know, Mace. I know something happenedâ€œ I think I'll join you in the control room. I need to clear my head."

**

PART THREE

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Amidala was pleased and Anakin overjoyed to see the ship back. Acleisst stayed on the hip after they had landed; Yoda said she wanted to look around inconspicuously first, and would join them later in the council room. He did not say, although he knew, that she had another reason for not disembarking with them; a reason with blonde hair and gray eyes.

Once everyone had cleared away and only maintenance techs were left in the hanger, Acleisst disembarked and made her way through the building to the palace proper. She was not stopped or even noticed by anyone, even though she was not commonly dressed and still barefoot; her aura actively encouraged everyone who saw her to ignore her. This allowed her to wander freely throughout the Theed Palace, and to inspect various offices and rooms unhindered. She lingered some time in Senator Palpatine's offices (he had already returned to Coruscant, but his functionaries were still frantically busy), and eventually found herself in the Queen's smaller audience chamber, where Queen

Amidala, attended as always by her orange-clad handmaidens, was meeting with some off-world dignitaries.

"I believe it to be most fair, your Highness," a Corellian emissary was saying, obviously referring to a document in the hands of the young queen. "After your recent unpleasantness with the Trade Federation, we thought your people would welcome trade stability again."

"Your "generous" offer is absolutely rejected, your Grace. Naboo will not sign any agreement limiting its right of trade to any one." The queen handed the document to one of her handmaidens, who tucked it away in her robes. "If that is the only offer you have to make, your Grace, then we believe our audience is over."

The Corellian spluttered and argued ineffectively with the Queen and her first Minister, but Acleisst paid them no heed. Her mind was focused instead on the handmaiden who had taken the datapad from the queen, a handmaiden whose dark eyes were staring at her quizzically. So intent was her gaze and deep her puzzlement that she was taken by surprise when the Queen and the rest of her retinue stood to leave. Acleisst followed them out to an anteroom, where the handmaiden went to store the datapad in an electronic office, apart from the queen and the rest of helpers. Acleisst stayed near her, and when far enough apart from the rest of the room, spoke quietly to her.

"Not necessarily a good idea to alienate the Corellians so, Highness. However, I cannot fault you on your taste."

The handmaiden did a double take, and seemed to have trouble focusing on the woman in blue. "Who are you? How did you get in here?"

Acleisst went on as if she hadn't spoken. "Although, I didn't read the agreement. Knowing them, it was completely biased. Overall, good work, your Majesty."

The orange clad girl was getting more and more confused. "I.. uh, what is going on here? Who are you? Why do you keep calling me that?"

"Oh, I know who you are, and I think this posing is good for you. However," here she shook a mock warning finger in the girl's face, "don't get carried away. Although, I sense you are not the type to play hooky from her responsibilities."

Still frowning, the girl regarded her curiously. "You, you came in with the Jedi, didn't you. You're who they went to see. How did you know?"

"Same way you knew me, my dear." Acleisst smiled. "Why don't we find some place more private to talk, hmm?"

Shortly, the two women were sitting on a bench in a private garden terrace overlooking part of the city. The disguised queen pushed back her hood to let the sun shine on her long, dark hair, and looked curiously at the woman sitting next to her. Acleisst also let her scarf fall from her head, and the wind blowing through her hair made the bells chime softly and musically. "This is a quite pleasant planet, Amidala. It almost makes me not regret leaving exile."

The Queen smiled shyly. She couldn't figure out her feelings for this tall, golden-brown woman, and it bothered her. "My real name is Padmeâ€| and I still don't understand how you managed to walk into the audience chamber with no one but me noticing you!"

"I'm called Acleisst, child, and no one noticed me for the same reason that I knew who the real queen was. You are very strong in the Force, my dear. Had Qui-Gon or Yoda been female, they would have sensed it too."

"The Force? That's what the Jedi worship, isn't it? But I thought there were no female Jedi?"

"A common misperception; we exist, but there are usually fewer females than males. And no, we do not worship the force; if anything, we worship each other since the Force is strong in all living things. It binds us all together in its web and permeates all things. We Jedi who understand it better, and those like yourself whose own native awareness of the Force is great, are able to do things that others might call miraculous or magic.

"The Force is different in we females than it is in males. You will note that I do not carry a silly lightsaberâ€| If I _have_ to fight, I will do it differently."

"You are the one Yoda and Obi-Wan went to see, then. Why?"

"Yes, I am. There is a danger rising and they came to me because I can identify it."

Padme smiled. "Then you're a little late. The war is all over. The Trade Federation is defeated and purged."

Acleisst shook her head musically. "Ah, no, my dear; you won the battle but the war is just beginning. The Trade Federation was led by a darker foe, a stronger force than they. I did not understand what made Naboo so important at first, but now, having met you, I begin to see."

The girl's face became stricken, and she looked out over her reconstructed city in dismay. "You mean, there will be more troubles coming? Why? Why here? What have we done?"

Scooting closer to her on the bench, Acleisst put her arm around Padme's shoulders. "Don't despair, my dear. The Jedi are a powerful force for good and we will do all we can to protect you and your people. You are brave and strong, and the Force is powerful in you. Let it buoy you when you are afraid or worried."

"I don't understand. Things are moving faster than Iâ€| I thought all would be well now. I don't understand the Force or what it means."

Acleisst took her arm from Padme's shoulders and wrapped her hands around the girl's clenched fists, turning herself to better see the girl's face. "Think of the Force as the spirit of everything. It flows around us, and through us. We can use it, as much as it uses us, to do things not usually possible."

"Then it controls our actions?"

"To an extent. For males, it is common for them to allow the Force to almost drive them. You might have already seen Jedi fightâ€|"

Padme nodded vigorously. "It was incredible. Just two of them and they took on an entire army, almost without thinking about it."

"Yes. True Jedi are able to achieve things that ordinary men could not do. But for women, it is different." Acleisst looked deeply into Padme's eyes. "In your recent memory, you have used the Force to fight. Is that not correct?"

Padme frowned, thinking back. "Well, we fought for the palace, and I was with the soldiers the whole time."

Acleisst smiled. "No. You were not with the soldiers, you led the soldiers. The Force is strong in you, as I have said. When you fought, you did not think, you simply did. You did not plan, you reacted. Correct?"

The girl's eyes turned inward, thinking back to the battle. "Y-yes, I remember at one point wondering why I wasn't afraid. I just did, without thinking. And that was the Force?"

"In a way. As I said, women the Force differently than men. We do not normally use it to fight; rather, we use it to create, to defend, which is why we were put in the universe in the first place. However, the Force allows us â€“ men and women both â€“ to see the paths and react to things that have not yet happened, and that allows us to become formidable foes."

"Now you've lost me," Padme laughed.

"I don't have time to give you the full course, but think of it like this. There is no real futureâ€| never was, never has been. Instead, there are paths, and each path leads to a separate reality. If I stand up now, in ten minutes, action A might occur. If I remain seated, then action A may not occurâ€| action B will. Does that make more sense to you?"

"Clear as mud. But I think I would like to learn more about it."

Acleisst smiled. "That's what I want to hear. You are a vertex, Padme. Things are swirling around you for some reason. The Force would not be strong in you without a purpose, and I believe we need to find that purpose. Have you heard the word Sith used?"

In the older woman's voice the word almost came out like a curse. Padme frowned again. "I think I've heard the other Jedi use the word, but I don't know what it is. Why does it sound so bad?"

"The Sith are followers of the dark side; it was truly they, not the Trade Federation, that you fought. Everything has two sides, Padme, even the Force. Others have used the dark side for their own purposes; the Sith use it for one reason onlyâ€| power. They are the sworn enemies of the Jedi, and have been for century upon century. Our two histories are intertwined and will continue to be so for

many, many years.

"The creature that killed my friend Qui-Gon was Sithâ€œ! the apprentice of the Sith lord. That person is the one I was called here to find." Acleisst's voice was bleak, and Padme shivered despite the warmth of the sun.

"You knew Master Qui-Gon?" she asked.

Acleisst looked down and sighed. "Yes, from long ago. I had hoped that I would never have to deal with the Sith again, and yet, here they are, causing trouble to my friends. I will do what I must to stop them."

"What if you can't?" asked Padme in a whisper. This conversation was frightening her much more than the battle ever had.

"I must. I am a Jedi. It is what we do." Acleisst looked up and smiled at the girl, acknowledging her discomfort over the topic of conversation. "This is a poor thing to discuss on such a beautiful day, yes? I will see what I can do to take you on as my Padawan-som, and teach you more about your power. In the meantime, I think you are wanted inside."

As if on cue, one of the handmaidens called Padme's name from the door to the palace. Padme called out "Coming!" and stood. Impulsively, she embraced the older woman, much to Acleisst's surprise. "I'm glad you came out of exile, or whatever it was," she whispered. "Between you and Obi-Wan, I know I've got nothing to fear now."

Not giving Acleisst time to respond, she hurried to the doorway, pulling her headpiece up around her as she went. Acleisst looked after her in astonishment, an unreadable and confused expression on her face. At the door to the palace, the handmaiden asked Padme, "who were you talking to, my Queen?"

Padme looked out at the garden, which was already empty. "Oh, no one important. What's next on the calendar, Sade?"

"I don't understand, Obi-Wan. Why do I have to keep practicing something I already know?" Anakin's voice was whiny and it grated on Obi-Wan's nerves like it never had before. The boy stood before him with a practice lightsaber in one hand. A practice 'bot floated behind him, quiescent while the lightsaber was off.

"Anakin," Obi-Wan began patiently, "that's the point. You don't already know it. Your hold over the Force is strong, but it has not yet become second nature to you. You seek to control it, like a stubborn bantha, rather than letting it flow through you as an ally."

Anakin looked down sullenly, scuffing one foot in the dust. They stood in a small, mostly unused courtyard of the massive Theed palace, observed only by some small birds roosting on the wall behind them.

With sudden inspiration, Obi-Wan stepped to his apprentice's side and pulled up the hood of his cloak. A few deft movements later, the hood was tied securely around Anakin's eyes, preventing his

sight.

"What 'cha do that for?" Anakin asked, surprised. "I can't see!"

"Exactly. Now, reach out with the Force, feel your opponent. Sight becomes a liability sometimesâ€| you have to learn to rely on the Force to guide you."

"This is silly."

"Do it, Ani. Prove to me you really know what you're doing."

Heaving a great, theatrical sigh, Anakin lifted the lightsaber and keyed it on. Immediately the practice 'bot swung into position, hissing softly around the blindfolded boy.

"Reach out with your mind, Ani. Feel, don't think. Let go your reason as you did in the pod race."

Obi-Wan could feel the tentative tendrils of thought coming from the boy before him. One shot was fired and was blocked, but only at the last possible nanosecond. Another was fired and not blocked, but avoided by a sidestep. Then, three shots in quick succession; two were blocked but the third got through and smacked into Anakin's shoulder. The lightsaber went out, the hood was ripped off. "This is stupid," Anakin said. "No one can do this."

The older man regarded his Padawan levelly. While outwardly calm, Obi-Wan was doing his best to control the frustration he felt. "I see. It's impossible. Do you want me to give you a demonstration to show you up?"

Anakin glared at his master from under tightly drawn eyebrows. "No," he said, shortly, then with an extravagant gesture, he continued, "it's just that I try and try andâ€|"

"First," Obi-Wan interrupted, holding up his hand, "you only tried for a few moments. That does not constitute a statistical universe, much less significant practice. Second â€" and you will hear this from Yoda if you ever say that word around him â€" there is no "try." There is either do, or do not. You did not. However, if you practice, you will do."

Obi-Wan keyed off the practice 'bot. "Master Ki gave you some books, I believe, while we were gone. How have you done on them?"

Anakin shrugged. "Okay, I guess. I'm not a really good reader, though. It wasn't necessary on Tatooine."

The older man smiled at his apprentice. "There's another area in which the Force could help you."

"In reading?_ How?"

"The Force is part of us, Anakin. It's part of the persons who wrote those books, therefore, it knows what's in the books. Let it flow through you as a friend, and you will find you can do many things. I'm going inside now; Yoda wants me. Please go to your room and study. I'll meet you later."

Still tightly controlling his emotions, Obi-Wan gathered the practice 'bot and moved off. Anakin watched him, sullen, angry and confused, and not understanding why. He knew he adored "worshipped even "Obi-Wan, but sometimes his impatience got in the way. It hurt to know that nothing could happen now, that he always had to wait until he was older, until he practiced more, for things to change.

When Anakin turned to leave the courtyard from a different doorway, a woman was standing there in the shadows next to the exit. She was tall and slender, her skin a golden brown and her hair did very interesting things in the light breeze blowing through the yard. What's more, he could sense something very strange about her, something that reminded him of Master Qui-Gon. As he stood in confusion, gaping at her, she spoke.

"So. You must be Anakin."

Not quite understanding why but heeding the manners his mother had drilled into him, he gave the mysterious woman a short bow. "Um, yes, ma'am?"

He could not see her face well in the shadows, but he felt she was smiling. "I am Acleisst. You may address me as Master, since you are a Padawan and apparently have need to remember your place."

Anakin immediately bristled at this, which was what Acleisst was aiming for. Abruptly, he felt the Force of her will in his mind, almost brutally squashing his sense of self " and the sharp retort he was planning " down. As quickly as it began, her will was withdrawn, leaving him reeling. She continued mildly, as if she had done nothing.

"Obi-Wan is young, and you are his first Padawan. I sense that he is less worried about his ability to teach you as he is your ability to learn. I am much older than Obi-Wan, and have had many Padawans. Your innate strengths do not surprise me nor do they awe me, Anakin. You have much to learn, and you might as well accept that."

For the first time since he had left Tatooine, Anakin felt himself lose control. Tears " of rage, of confusion, of loss " sprang to his eyes and suddenly he was not an immensely talented Jedi Padawan, but rather a nine year old boy who missed his mother.

Before he had even a chance to get himself under control, she was at his side, on her knees embracing him. "Let it go, Ani," she whispered. "You have not had a chance to come to terms with your loss, and you need to do that before you can progress. Let it go."

All at once his face was buried in her shoulder, his arms wrapped fiercely around her as the tears stormed out. She said nothing, merely held him tightly as he sobbed uncontrollably. Eventually, the sobs died down to gasps, and then to sniffles. She held him away from her and used a corner of her scarf to wipe his eyes. "Do you have a handkerchief?" she asked quietly. He nodded, and she added, "use it then."

As he did, then while tucking it back away, he tentatively reached out to her, expecting to find derision at his weakness. Instead, he

found warmth, compassion and love; it felt not unlike his mother and that almost caused another spate of weeping. But he managed to get himself back under control, and to his surprise, found her delicately helping him do this. Her mind touch was indescribable and infinitely comforting.

"Under control?" she asked gently. He nodded. "Good. I will be here from now on, and if you have any problems you may bring them to me â€“ after you have discussed them with your Master. Do you understand?"

He nodded again, and added "yes, Master. I think I do."

Her face lit into a smile, and she stood back up, keeping hold of his shoulders in a comforting grip. "The difference is choice, Ani. On Tatooine, you were a slave and not by your choice. Here, you are a Padawan, a station many boys would gladly kill to achieve. Your Master here is someone who loves and values you, not as a commodity, but for yourself. Don't ever forget that."

Suddenly ashamed of his previous actions towards Obi-Wan, Anakin looked down. A firm, warm hand on his chin forced his face back up, however, to look into golden brown eyes. "No, Anakin. This is your second lesson; always look people in the eye. You are no longer a slave, you are a Jedi in training. The use of the honorific Master is to remind you, however, that pride goes before a fall. Never let your pride get the best of you, Ani. Remember your beginnings, be mindful of your station, understand that the first law of a Jedi is to serve, not to rule."

She turned with him and walked him toward the exit. "And here's your third lesson from meâ€¦ then I will stop. Remember your mistakes. Those who forget their mistakes are doomed to repeat them, again and again. Now, I believe your Master has asked you to do some reading. Run along now."

He was halfway out the door before he realized she was not physically with him. He turned and looked back at her standing in the sun of the courtyard. "Master Acleisst!" he called. "Thank you!" Then he turned again and pelted for the steps to his room.

Acleisst smiled and murmured â€“ mostly to herself, "a quite remarkable boy indeed, Qui-Gon," then turned and left through the same door Obi-Wan had used a short while before.

**

PART FOUR

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Obi-Wan Kenobi felt uneasy sitting with the Master Jedis of the Jedi Council. His elevated station did not, as yet, feel comfortable to him, in fact sometimes felt like an ill-fitting suit. However, Yoda had specifically requested his presence, and one did not disagree with the aged master. So, he sat in the back of the room and listened, as his own Master had taught him, until he felt he had something to contribute. There was an empty chair between Mace and Yoda.

"We are going to have to return to Coruscant, Yoda," Ki-Adi Mundi was saying heatedly. "From reports we've received this "purge" is getting out of hand."

"That may be so, Ki," answered Mace, "but I don't see where we Jedi should concern ourselves in it. The bureaucracy has existed this long without our help, it will continue to do so I'm sure even after Palpatine has solidified his position."

Yoda did not answer, seemingly content to let Mace speak for him. "Plus," Mace continued, "we have the situation here to contend with. We need to know why this planet was important enough for the Sith to take notice, and, of course, we need to know who that Sith lord is."

"I may be able to answer that first question," a quiet voice said from the doorway. The assembled Jedi turned as one to see Acleisst standing in the doorway, framed by the light from the setting sun. Ki leapt to his feet, his eyes wide.

"Acleisst!" he gasped in shock.

The tall woman smoothly entered the chamber and walked to the empty chair between Mace and Yoda, which had obviously been left for her. "Hello, Ki. You seem surprised to see me, old friend."

"Iâ€| it is a shock, Cless. When you didn'tâ€| I meanâ€| " Ki was obviously flustered, which caused some surprise to Mace.

"I told you she had come back with us, Ki," Mace said to the white-headed Jedi, frowning.

Unperturbed, Acleisst took her seat and watched as Ki Mundi slowly sat back down. His disconcerted demeanor intrigued her, though she did not show it. "I think our friend was just not expecting me at this moment, Mace. How have you been, Ki? You look well. I see many old friends here, and some new ones. Hello, Yaddle. Peace be with you, Arum's budding. I apologize for not joining you sooner."

As this mini-drama unfolded, Obi-Wan pressed himself further back into the background, not wishing to be noticed by her. He well remembered what had happened on the ship, and did not want to repeat it. Instead, he concentrated on listening and not looking at her.

"I have been exploring Theed since arriving; seeking to understand why so much happened here on this small, unobtrusive planet," she continued. "There is a female here who is strong in the Force, and I think that is part of the reason why the Sith have taken such an unhealthy interest in Naboo. He _has_ been here, you know."

Mace jerked his head to stare at Acleisst. "Who, the Sith Lord?" he demanded.

"Yes," she answered, not taking her eyes from Ki Mundi. "I sensed his presence in many places, some more strongly than others. He is not, unfortunately, here any longer."

"W-who is he, Cless?" asked Ki, both eagerly and nervously.

She sighed, shaking her head and lowering her eyes. "That, I cannot

tell you. I can feel him, can guess where he was, but not his identity. Not until he returns..."

Yoda had been studying the woman next to him since she sat down. Now, he spoke in his trademark rusty voice. "Stay here we should, until returns he does. Sure you are, that return he will?"

"Yes, old toad, I'm quite sure of it."

"Referred you to a female, strong in the Force. Name she has?"

Acleisst looked significantly at Yoda while answering, "her name is Padme. I think I will take her on as a Padawan-som while I am here. She could use some instruction."

Obi-Wan suppressed a gasp. He knew that Padme was actually Queen Amidalaâ€¹ and tried to think back if Yoda and Mace or any other member of the council knew of the young Queen's deception. His master, Qui-Gon, had seen through the masquerade, but not at first, and even Obi-Wan had trouble believing it until she admitted it to the Gunguns. If she were strong in the Force, that would explain a lot, he thought.

"If you think it best, of course," Mace was saying, "then by all means take her on. I take it to mean that you will stay here until the Sith show themselves again?"

"Cless," Ki interrupted before she answered, "I was just telling the council that we ought to return to Coruscant. Palpatine, a senator from Naboo representing this quadrant, was recently elected Chancellor and seems to be intent on dismantling the senate from the inside out. There have been terrible purgesâ€¹"

"I am aware of that, Ki," interrupted Acleisst softly. "I've been to this Palpatine's offices here on Naboo. I don't think there's a need for us to get involved at this time."

"How can you say that, Cless? I know you don't want to go back to Coruscant, but really, aren't we here to serve and protect?"

"Ki," Mace said tiredly, "if you feel the need to go back to Coruscant and protect the bureaucracy, then perhaps you should."

"I agree with Mace," Eeth Koth said quietly. "The bureaucracy has never been a friend to the Jedi council, and has not asked for our help now. We owe them nothing."

"I will not become involved here, Ki," added Acleisst, "since I do not consider myself formally part of the council. I intend on staying on this planet for the time being. Sometimes watching things from afar is better than being caught up in it. Your sight is clearer."

Ki threw up his hands. "Bah. Cless, you are more a part of the council than any of us. But I will bow to the majority here. Mark my words, I have an evil premonition over this situation."

With that, Ki Mundi got up and stalked out of the chamber, pausing to take Acleisst's hand and bow over it. With his departure, many other

Jedi masters left, also stopping to pay their respects to the Jedi Lord. Finally, only she, Mace Windu, Yoda, and Obi-Wan Kenobi were left in the council chamber. Fluidly, Acleisst got to her feet and moved to one of the floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the city, where she stood with her hands clasped behind her back. "He's right, you know," she said quietly, "Palpatine is a problem. Somehow, some way, the Sith are caught up with him."

Mace and Yoda exchanged glances. "Think you then to Coruscant we should go?" asked Yoda.

"No," she replied shortly. "My friend, I don't expect to ever set foot on the city-planet again. But my bad feeling about it is not solely linked to the sadness I had there. Evil times are coming."

She turned and regarded Obi-Wan reluctantly, careful not to look in his eyes. "I met your Padawan Anakin a little while ago, Obi-Wan. Qui-Gon was right and he is a vertex. But so is Padme. You know who Padme is, don't you?"

Obi-Wan nodded. Mace looked curiously at Acleisst. "Who are you referring to, Cless?"

"Padme is Queen Amidala," Obi-Wan answered for her softly. "Since she's so young, she regularly has an older handmaiden take her place in situations where she could be at risk."

Mace turned back to Acleisst in shock. "You can't expect to take on the Queen of Naboo as your Padawan-som, Cless! That's ridiculous!"

"No more ridiculous than Ki wanting to come to the aid of the bureaucracy on Coruscant, blackheart," Acleisst answered mildly. "I don't intend on leaving this planet, and I'm sure her government could function quite well without her actually at the head for a while."

"Interesting idea is this," said Yoda. "Presents it does with a new angle. Think you that the Sith are interested in the Queen as breeder?"

Her face hardened. "I think it is a probability approaching unity. The fact that Anakin is here, and the fact that they are friends, does not escape me either. The Sith lord may seek to replace his apprentice with one of them."

"Never." Obi-Wan surprised himself with vehemence in which he responded to these words. "I will not allow it. Anakin is my responsibility, and, through my Master, so is Amidala. Whatever I have to do to protect them, I will do."

Acleisst's look softened towards the young Knight as she listened to his words. "Your intentions do you credit, Obi-Wan. You needn't worry about Padme, however; I will take on the responsibility for protecting her from here on out."

Mace and Yoda had been staring at each other during this exchange, obviously communing on another wavelength. Mace nodded, then spoke. "I begin to see the paths here. I think the two of you should team

up; leave the city and take your Padawans with you. Meanwhile, we can work from within to seek the identity of the Sith."

"Agree I do," said Yoda. "On the march are events, here. Easier it is, for two to protect than one. Especially if Jedi is not suspected."

It did not escape either Jedi Master that the pair was reluctant to take this advice. Acleisst flowed to a seat on the floor before Yoda, looking him up in the face. "Are you sure of this plan, old toad? Obi-Wan's name is well known now on Naboo, and I am not completely unknown, especially to the Sith."

Yoda reached out a hoary green claw to the brown woman, who grasped it tightly in both hands. "Dear one, come we are to crossing of paths." Yoda reached out his other claw to Mace, who took it. "See I do where some lead; others are dark to me." Mace reached out his other hand to Obi-Wan, who reluctantly came forward to take it. "We four events will witness, events will shape. It is time, now, for decisions, for choices to be made."

Mace looked up at Obi-Wan, standing over him still holding one hand. "Obi-Wan's name is known, yes, but Kenobi is a fairly common name. No one will recognize, oh, Ben Kenobi, and his young apprentice mechanic, Ani. And Padme is virtually unknown to her people as their Queen."

Acleisst smiled a sardonically at the dark man. "And me? "Cless" is well known, blackheart."

"But Leia is not," smiled back Mace, "an excellent derivation of your name. And if the two of you pose as husband and wife, well, I do think we have a plan here."

Both Jedi stiffened at this, and a wild look came into Obi-Wan's eyes. Mace pretended not to notice. "Padme is, of course, a bit old to be your daughter, but not a cousin, or, even better: a niece. We can find you a small house on the outskirts of Theed, where you can set up shop and live quietly, training your Padawans."

"Good plan this is," said Yoda, ignoring the discomfort Acleisst was causing him as she tightly gripped his claw in both hands. "Allows you to be far and near at once. And hides in plain sight the ones we fear for. Yes. Agree I do."

"But Master," said Obi-Wan, fighting panic and not quite understanding why, "it won't hide us from anyone talented in the Force. If the Sith comes back, it won't take him long to locate us using it."

Before Mace could answer, Acleisst said bitterly, "he's relying on my shielding us, Obi-Wan. He knows I can do it, and protect us from all but the most determined seekers. Yes. It is a good plan â€" you bastard."

The look Mace gave her was at once ashamed and sympathetic, understanding and sorrowful. But it was Yoda who spoke, gently, at the rigidly controlled woman before him. "Do what we must, dear one. Serve, we do, the Force. Choices made here the paths will affect for years to come. I see two hopes coming from this decision; save us or

doom us, one will."

Acleisst's head was bowed to the floor, studiously ignoring the others in the room; her hair hid her face so Obi-Wan could not see it. Yoda's words sent a chill as of an ice cold wind through him; he could tell Yoda spoke from the Force and a Sight into the future, and he knew "he was quite positive " that Yoda spoke truth. Furthermore he was certain that whatever the outcome of this meeting, he would be inextricably wrapped up with Anakin, Amidala and Acleisst for years to come. When he came back to himself , he noticed Mace staring at him quizzically.

Swallowing, he fought to get his emotions under control and finally managed to speak, albeit hoarsely. "Very well; I see the logic in this course of action, even though I'm not sure of it's wisdom. As long as Master Acleisst is satisfied with it, then, well, I guess I am too."

The woman sitting before Yoda slowly brought her head up; she adamantly avoided looking any of the three men in the eye. "I agree," she said in a voice devoid of all emotion and inflection. "Mace, Yoda; please set it up. Yoda, I will take you up on the offer of your suite to sleep tonight. Also, tonight I will visit Padme and inform her of the plan. Perhaps tomorrow " or the day after " we will be prepared."

She stood, but Yoda did not release one of her hands, forcing her to focus on him, which she finally did, reluctantly. "Understand, I do," he said gently. "Sympathy, I feel. Love, I extend to you. Help, I offer. Face this alone, you need not. Remember, Cless."

Her jaw worked at the tension of holding back and controlling her emotions, but her eyes did not leave the aged Jedi master. Finally, after a long moment, she shook her head sharply, causing a jangling in her hair. At that, Yoda released her hand. She left the room quickly, without another word. Mace sighed as he watched and felt her go.

"This is going to be difficult, Yoda," he said softly.

Obi-Wan, meanwhile, stood frozen. Mace had released his hand when Acleisst left the room, but he did not drop his arm to his side. The two masters looked at his stricken face, then at each other. "He's going to have to know," said Mace.

"No. All of it he need not," Yoda answered. "Jedi Knight, to me heed. Strong in the Force is Acleisst. Battle with Sithâ€| much pain it caused, much pain; not only to Jedi, but to Acleisst as well. This you will learn; Sith battle with mind and might. Apprentice you faced hurt you, but master would hurt you more; in mind would master hurt you."

Obi-Wan's head turned to focus on Yoda. "This is what happened to her, isn't it."

Yoda nodded sadly. His ears were drooping and his eyelids sagged. "And more, yes, and more. Hurt she is, in mind, not in body. As much as she will help you, you will help her. When ready she is, tell you the story she will."

The young knight nodded. "All right. I'll be in my quarters then, with Anakin. Thank you, Masters."

Mace and Yoda sat in the darkening chamber long after the other two had left. Each was wrapped in their own memories of pain, and chaos, and loss. Finally, after it had become quite dark, Mace spoke quietly to his friend. "This will kill her, you know."

Yoda nodded in the darkness, and sighed.

There were good things and bad things about being a Queen, Padme thought. One of the worst was the constant hovering of her handmaidens, even when she was in disguise as one of them. She was never alone, even when she slept; the watchers were just more unobtrusive then.

It was late, and Padme had just fallen into a light doze after going to bed. She heard the low murmur of people in her antechamber — guards, servants — and this common noise soothed her mind, troubled since the visit in the garden of the strange Jedi woman. She dozed, and in her mind heard the woman's voice calling her softly.

"Padme, Padme dear, wake to me please." It took her a moment to realize it wasn't a dream, and there was a heavy, dark shadow sitting on one side of her bed. She came fully awake with a jerk, and sat up suddenly.

"No, no, calm yourself," the voice softly said, and one reassuring hand was laid on her shoulder. "It's only me. I did not mean to startle, but we have things to discuss."

Padme reached out to the light source on the small table next to her bed and waved it to just enough brightness to see the figure on her bed. Acleisst looked terrible, she thought, and felt even worse; but she wasn't sure how she knew that.

"Are you all right?" were her first words behind a piercing gaze, and again she surprised Acleisst, who shook her head in wonder.

"Your strength is amazing, child. Yes, I'm fine; thank you for asking. Are you fully awake?" Padme nodded. "Good. Then you must listen.

"I have been with the other Jedi masters, debating your fate and the fate of your world. You know something now, now that I've explained it to you, of the Sith threat." Again, Padme nodded, mute. "Then know what I suspect — that you are the reason for the Sith lord's interest. You, and Anakin. We are not sure how, or why, only that you are in danger.

"To that end, we intend to shield you. Obi-Wan, who is Anakin's Jedi Master, and I will take you and Ani to a safe place outside the city. There, we will teach you and Anakin in the ways of the Force while protecting you from Sith interest. The other Jedi masters agree that this — hiding in plain sight as it were — will help keep you as secure as possible."

During this speech, Padme became increasingly agitated. "But how, Acleisst? I'm Queen of Naboo. My council of ministers will never allow me to leave."

Acleisst smiled. "First off, better get used to calling me "Aunt Leia," and Obi-Wan "Uncle Ben." These are the names we will use on our adventure. Secondly, your council is no match for the Jedi council. They will agreeâ€| most of them will not even know of your absence. It is absolutely necessary that no one but the Jedi know where we are. There is a traitor in your house, Padme; I'm not sure who it is or even if it is more than one, but there is a traitor who belongs to the Sith here."

Shivering, Padme clutched at the older woman's arm. "B-but are you sure you can protect me and Anakin?" She looked frantically around her familiar suite, as if looking for Sith behind the drapes or furniture.

"Be at peace, Padme," Acleisst said soothingly, "you will be fine. There will be a few days to set this up; until then, you are protected as best as we can here in the palace. I don't doubt that we have several days, months, even years maybe, before we have to start watching over our shoulders. And I will know when that time comes. I have faced the Sith before."

With a light touch to Padme's face, Acleisst soothed, calmed and relaxed the young girl's mind. "Sleep now. I will come to you later tomorrow with a better idea of our plans."

Padme laid down again, and Acleisst gently pulled her bedclothes up to her chin, tucking her in firmly. Then, she kissed her forehead softly, again saying, "sleep, dear one. I will always be near you."

Mostly asleep already, Padme smiled. "Thank you, Ac- I mean, Aunt Leia. I'll see you tomorrow." And then, she was asleep.

Acleisst sat on the Queen's bed for a long time, watching the girl's even breathing and thinkingâ€| about missed chances, paths not taken, loves lost. One large tear escaped her rock-like control and slowly oozed down her cheek to splash on her hand. It burned, like acid.

Obi-Wan was still rather dazed when he returned to his quarters. Automatically, he secured the door, hung up his plain brown coat and checked his comm unit for messages. He felt Anakin's presence in the next room, and noted with distant pleasure the calm waves of thought emanating from his Padawan. He sat down on at a small table with a printout in his hands but did not read it. Instead, he went back over what had happened in the council chamber â€“ over and over again â€“ trying to make sense of his feelings and the events.

He must have been sitting there for some time without realizing it, when Anakin appeared at the doorway, holding a large book in his hands. His face bore a sleepy, disheveled look, as if he'd been almost dozing.

"Master?" he asked. "Are you all right?"

Slowly, Obi-Wan came back to himself from the miles away where he'd been drifting. Part of his mind noted with pleasure the fact that Anakin called him "Master"â€| and realized that here was yet another example of Acleisst's delicate brown hand in affairs. He had well

understood Anakin's reluctance to use the honorific and did not press it. But, after one short meeting with her, here was his Padawan finally acting like a Padawan. He smiled, and stretched, releasing cramped back muscles. "I'm sorry, Anakin. Yes, I'm fine. It was a stressful council meeting, that had many outcomes. You'll learn more of it tomorrow."

Anakin nodded, turned to go, then stopped. "Master? May I ask a question?"

Obi-Wan snorted a reply, smiling broadly. "Of course you can; that is why you are my Padawan. Any question you ever have you are charged to ask me, young man. It's your duty as a Jedi."

Anakin smiled uncertainly, then came closer to his Master. "Several times, I've heard I'm too old to be trained as a Jedi, and even in the histories," and here he nodded to the book he carried, "it refers to age. But no one has ever explained why. I'm not even tenâ€! I used to think that was old enough, but now I understand it's not. Why?"

Obi-Wan sighed; he knew this question would come up and he had actually been dreading it. Then he realized with a start that after all that had happened today, this question was actually the least of his worries.

"Normally, Ani," he began, "the Jedi council identifies a talented child early, often in infancy. Most Republic worlds have Jedi presence and it is an honor for a child to be identified as a Jedi candidate. There are so few females recognized as strong in the force, and marriage is not allowed for a Jedi, so children have to come from without. The separation is easier when the child is youngerâ€! the council operates crÃ"ches on many worlds for this specific purpose. The parents are encouraged to visit for the first few months, then, the visits taper off as the child is eventually imprinted on his Master, generally a year or two before your age. I was assigned to Qui-Gon when I was sevenâ€!"

The older man smiled sadly, remembering that fateful day. "He was like a father and a mother to me. He worked me hard, don't doubt it, but he was kind too." Obi-Wan sighed again.

"That is why," he continued, "the council was reluctant to take you on as a Padawan. You had not been brought up in the Jedi traditions, and your power in the Force was so great, that it caused not a little trepidation."

"But," Anakin said thoughtfully, "doesn't it happen where a child is not identified young, like I was?"

"Oh, yes, that has happened, many times," Obi-Wan acknowledged, "and the training begun later. But generally the child is a more normal adept." Here, the master looked intently at his Padawan. "I don't want you to dwell on this, Ani, but you do have a significant giftâ€! greater than either I or Qui-Gon had ever seen, especially for one not brought up in the Jedi traditions. Possibly greater than even Yoda has seen before. This does not mean, however," and here Obi-Wan tapped the table with his hand for emphasis, "that you do not need to practice. I know how much you hate to hear this, but when you're bit older, you will understand the danger you are in right now, in your

formative years."

Anakin looked at his Master soberly. "The dark side. Yes. I've been reading about it. It scares me, Master."

Obi-Wan shook his head sharply. "No. Do not let it scare you. Simply be aware of it and remember your own limitations. Remember what Yoda told you about fear. A healthy respect is all that is necessary here, Ani."

Changing the subject after a short pause, Obi-Wan continued, almost reluctantly. "I understand you met someone today."

Anakin's face lit up. "Yes! Master Acleisst. She's tremendous, isn't she?"

Obi-Wan smiled wryly, and nodded. "Yes, she is. We'll be spending some time with her in the future, her and Padmeâ€| you remember Padme."

Anakin's baffled look amused the Jedi Knight. "Butâ€| but Padme is the Queen, isn't she?"

"Well, yes, butâ€|" Obi-Wan groped for words, then finally gave it up. "It's late. We'll discuss this in the morning. I know I'm tired and I'm sure you are too. Good night, Ani."

"Good night Master. Sleep well."

"You too, Ani, you too."

**

PART FIVE

**

In the end, they recruited the Queen's first minister, Sio Bibble, and her guard Captain, Panaka, to help them in the plan. It was Panaka who came up with the house and the first Minister who suggested the area and job. Neither, needless to say, liked the idea of trusting their queen to even a Jedi master, and when told they would have little contact with her for some time, went ballistic.

Mace and Yoda managed to gain control of the situationâ€| with the Minister through Jedi mind control since he was least responsive to the idea. Panaka, having worked with and seen in action both Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan, was much easier to deal with. His reluctance to the idea came through a sense of duty to the office of the Queen, not from sheer hysteria. After the threat of the Sith was explained to him, he was even more amenable to the idea of "hiding in plain sight."

The house was a comfortable one; four bedrooms, two studies, a large "everything" room with a well-appointed kitchen, two bathing rooms and a pleasant, large terrace looking out over the city on the horizon. There was also a large, unused garage-like building out back, which was easily converted into a machine shop and practice arena. It was located about three klicks outside of Theed proper, in the small bedroom community of Tlinga. Within a few days of the

idea's proposal, they had moved in.

Their cover was simple and effective; Ben and Leia Kenobi, having been left homeless after the brutal attack on Naboo's capitol, Theed, wanted someplace quiet to start over. With them was Ani, Ben's apprentice machinist (a war orphan) and their niece, Padme, also a war orphan. The pseudo-family kept to themselves but was genial and accommodating where necessary. Anyone prying more deeply would be met by Acleisst's shield and shown exactly what they were expecting to see.

But there were few such busybodies in the quiet village of Tlinga. Nestled in a piedmont region (but half a planet away from Padme's humble mountain village), its residents were about half-and-half small farmers and commuting city workers. Anakin and Padme didn't take long to fit in, and within a few days were acting like they had been there their whole lives. Anakin took to calling Acleisst "Aunt Leia" too, at least in public; no one questioned the honorific Master he used towards "Uncle Ben" since he was nominally an apprentice anyway (the words Jedi or Sith were never used in public, and rarely in private). That both children were usually quiet and withdrawn was seen as normal, given the stated fact that they were war orphans.

Acleisst and Obi-Wan had a harder time adjusting to their pseudo-marriage. Obi-Wan could tell that she was uncomfortable being around him, and indeed, he felt almost the same around her. Therefore, they were not seen together in public very often; it would have been difficult to keep up pretenses in such a situation. He mostly kept to the workshop and she to the house and vegetable garden; the only time they were together was during meals, and then, usually only in the evening. Acleisst turned out to be a good, but not spectacular, cook who was willing to make breakfast if asked nicely and who would always provide a good dinner, but lunch was up to the hungry to make. After a short adjustment period, Padme was happy to help out on homely tasks such as cooking and turned out to have a gift for it; Acleisst wondered how long her helpfulness would actually last, though. Regardless of any tension between the elders, dinner was always lively and good.

In the meantime, both Jedi were concentrating on training their students. Obi-Wan's training of young Anakin was fairly straightforward; weapons training, mind discipline, defense, and in the evening, book learning. Acleisst's training of Padme, however, was vastly different, and often took unusual paths. At times, when Obi-Wan had to be away doing their cover work, Acleisst trained both youngsters, and Ani learned almost as much from her as he did Obi-Wan.

And so the long warm Naboo summer drifted into fall. Anakin and Obi-Wan were kept busy with customers seeking their knowledge to prepare machinery for winter, and the "girls" were kept busy in the garden and preparing vegetables for storage through the winter. The men had developed a local reputation for being exceptionally good with machinery. It was even noted that about once a week, on various days, someone from the palace in Theed would actually call on them to fix a minor item. This was not as it seemed, though, since hidden, hand written messages were sent and received with this person to reassure nervous councilors and give status reports to others, not so nervous.

One unusually warm, clear day in late autumn, Acleisst and Padme were out in the kitchen garden removing the last of the roots and tubers from the ground. The weather report was saying that it would probably be one of the last good days of the year, and frost was called for within a week. But at the moment, it looked like the beautiful sky would go on forever and frost seemed like an exceedingly distant threat.

Finally, with a noise part a sigh and part a groan, Acleisst rolled off her knees to sit on the soft, warm ground. Her basket was full, and her hair, caught up in a bandana, was sweaty. Padme, across the row from her, grinned. "Getting too old for this, Aunt Leia?"

Brushing futilely at knees caked in mud, Acleisst grimaced at her Padawan-som. "That is not for the student to speculate, youngster. I declare this patch empty!" if we've missed anything, well, the animals can have it. Let's go dip our toes and cool off."

There was a small stream running through the light strand of woods at the base of the hill on which the house stood; the water was cold and chuckled over rocks, a pleasant place. Padme, also tired of digging, enthusiastically agreed. They put their baskets on the porch to the back door, shucked off their practical overalls in favor of the shorts underneath, and headed off downhill, both of them barefoot.

The sun was hot in the garden, but under the trees it was cool and the grass on bare toes felt wonderful. Padme almost skipped down the hill, her enthusiasm making her more like Anakin's age than a 14 year old monarch. At the stream she waded fully in, while Acleisst sat on a rock and dabbed her feet in the cooling water. She watched as Padme playfully tried to catch fish and other crustaceans, much too wily to be caught by a human.

Without turning, Acleisst suddenly said, "Ani, what are you doing down here? Have your lessons ended so soon?"

Sheepish, Anakin stepped from around the tree he'd been hiding behind. Padme, who had looked up when Acleisst spoke, gaped at her teacher. "How'd you know he was there? I didn't even see him follow us!"

Acleisst smiled warmly at the young girl in the water before her. "I heard him, dear." She dipped her mud caked hands into the water and started washing off the dirt and digging it out from under her short fingernails.

"But I didn't make a sound!" I know I didn't!" Anakin protested, walking down to the water and removing his shoes.

"No," Acleisst said, still smiling, "your body didn't, but your thoughts did. I heard your public mind long before you even began following us to the creek. And you didn't answer my question; you're not skipping lessons, are you?"

His shoes off, Anakin waded into the water, joining Padme. "No, Uncle Ben had a customer from Theed," this was the shorthand all of them used for referring to the "official" visitors, "and said I could be

excused for the day. Oh, Pad, he said he'd have some news for you at dinner."

Padme looked excited and happy. "Oh goody. I was hoping for some palace gossip. Aunt Leia, what did you mean by Ani's public mind?"

Finished with her hands, Acleisst dried them on some convenient moss, then rested her elbows on her knees. "We all have two parts to our minds," she began, in the voice that the children privately called her "teaching voice," "public and private. The public mind is that which is foremost on our thoughtsâ€| a favorite song you can't get out of your head, your next words as you are speaking, and so on. Those are the easy thoughts to pick up from a person because they are the closest to the "top," so to speak.

"Beneath that, there is the private mind. A fully trained Jedi can reach beneath the public to the private, but, unless there is a definite need, should never do so without permission. Even then, it is rare. And, a fully trained Jedi â€" as well as someone who is merely talented in the Force â€" is often able to hide both his public and private minds from the scrutiny of anyone else."

"But how do you hear the public mind?" Ani, asked, enthralled.

"How?" she smiled. "Might as well ask you to explain how you breathe, or how your heart beats. It is not something that can be explained, only done. The two of you do it all the time."

"We do?!" â€|in chorus.

"Certainly. Ani. When the Customer from Theed came by today, what message did he bring, was it urgent?"

"No, he just had some regular news and was rather bored with the whole thing," Ani said promptly.

"Did he tell you that?"

Anakin blinked. Then his eyes got wide. "Why, no. No, he didn't. I wasn't even in the room when he and Uncle Ben started talking. Did I hear his public mind? Without even knowing it?"

"Of course. Every time you are near a person, you are unconsciously picking up on their public thoughtsâ€| which are manifested not only in how they think, but in how they move, speak, every tiny gesture. It is all part of the Force, and once the Force has become second nature to you, it will become even easier."

Padme stood knee deep in the water, frowning with concentration. "Then why can't I pick up your public mind, Aunt Leia?"

The older woman smiled. "Maybe you're trying too hard. Relax, close your eyes, and feel the Force. Do you remember the discipline I taught you?"

Nodding, Padme closed her eyes and did the deep breathing, gently extending her aura in search of the Force. Once her mind was under control, she "looked" with her mind's eye for Acleisst and Anakin,

suddenly realizing she didn't need to "look" for them, for they were right here with her. Her eyes flew open.

"I was trying too hard! You were there all the time!"

"Good job, Padme. I am pleased with your progress." Squinting at the sun, which was beginning to sink behind the mountains, she continued, "looks like time to start dinner. You two can stay here for a while, but please come in within the hour."

She stood, stretched a bit, smiled at the children and made her way up the hill. Padme waded over to the stream's edge and took Acleisst's place on the large boulder. Ani, a strange and thoughtful expression on his face, joined her.

They sat there for a while, in companionable silence, listening to the birdsong and the chuckling of the stream over rocks, practicing seeking out each other's public minds. Finally, Anakin spoke.

"Pad," he asked, "do you ever miss being a queen? Giving up all those clothes and stuff for digging up roots in the kitchen garden?"

Padme didn't answer for a while, and Ani, reading her public thoughts, let her take her time. "Well, at first, I thought I would," she started hesitantly, "but nowâ€¦ no. I don't miss it at all. What about you? Do you miss Tatooine?"

"Well, there are no pod races hereâ€¦" he said, and she interrupted him with a hearty "thank goodness for that!"

He stuck out his tongue at her. "At first, I really missed it, you know, my mom and all. I guess I don't miss it all that much now, though, but I still miss Mom."

Padme put her hand on his in a gesture of comfort. "I know. I know it was hard for you last week on your birthday, too."

The week before when Anakin turned ten, Obi-Wan and Acleisst gave him a small, heartfelt party, with a cake baked by Padme from scratch that was actually quite edible. They could sense how sad he was over his mother's absence, and didn't want to emphasize his loss. He moped about for a day or so, then seemed to forget the whole thing in a frenzy of practice.

"Yeah," he said. Silence fell again.

"But you know," he continued finally, "we've got it pretty good here. Uncle Ben and Aunt Leia are almost like parents to us. And, we're learning about the Force and all, and someday I'll be a Jedi Knight, just like Obi-Wan."

She smiled at him. "I know I like it a lot better with the freedom I have here. No one hovering over me every second of the dayâ€¦ no more hairdressers trying to pull my hair out of my head. Andâ€¦" here she drifted off for a second, then took a breath to continue in a rush. "I just know you'll see your Mom again, Ani. I'm not sure how I know it, but I know it."

Anakin smiled back. "Thanks, Pad. You're pretty greatâ€¦ for a girl, I mean."

"Oh, gee, thanks, Ani, what a compliment!"

"Well, it is a compliment. I think so anyway!"

"Hah. Well, this "girl" is gonna beat the poodoo out of you in a race back to the house!" With that, she leapt up and started running quickly back up the hill.

Ani yelled, "Hey! No Fair! I still gotta get my shoes!"

"Well then you'd better get moving, slowpoke!"

"I am not!"

"Are so!" drifted back down the hill, as Padme crested it and disappeared. Grabbing his shoes, Anakin streaked after her.

Winter came with a harsh, cold wind out of the mountains. Naboo's axial tilt was not large enough to cause a huge disparity in the seasons, and the house was not situated high enough in the mountains for intense cold and snow, but winter did, indeed, come. Near the turning of the season, there was a freak snowstorm that dumped knee high snow on Tlinga, effectively paralyzing the village and elating the children, including Padme and especially Ani, who had never seen snow before. Despite his lack of enthusiasm for cold weather, Anakin, like Padme, spent all day outside; sledding on makeshift sleds and building elaborate snow creations. By the end of the day, both of them had bright red cheeks and runny noses.

The cold snap lasted long enough for a small, ornamental pond in the center of town to freeze solid, letting Padme teach Ani another cold weather feat: ice-skating. He was a fast learner and before long was gliding across the ice like a pro. Evenings were spent inside, reading, listening to music or talking in front of the ancient, heavily ornamented, wood-burning stove near the center of the great room. The passage of time had somewhat eased Obi-Wan's and Acleisst's wariness towards one another, but they were still more comfortable on opposite sides of the room and still spoke to one another in stilted, formal tones.

One afternoon early in the following year, when the weather was still cold but spring was definitely threatening to burst out, Acleisst stood in the kitchen kneading dough. In a fit of ambition (not to mention boredom) she had decided to make bread from scratch and it was proving to be a bit more of a chore than she expected. Obi-Wan was in Theed, reporting in to the council, and the children were outside, visiting with friends. So intent was she on the huge ball of dough before her that she physically heard the commotion before she picked up the agitation in the Force. Padme was screaming at Anakin, who was chasing her, flinging slushy mud balls at her with great accuracy. Acleisst stopped her kneading long enough to check into the fuss, then went back to calmly beating the bread dough into submission.

Padme flung open the back door to the kitchen, still screeching. Using the Force (which was the only way to get her attention), Acleisst held up her hand and froze the girl into place. "Not like that, you won'tâ€œ! I just cleaned this kitchen and I won't have it all muddied up, thank you," she said briskly.

As another mud/slush ball came arcing after Padme, Acleisst deflected it with a flick of her finger, right back into the chest of the flinger. "You too, Anakin. You're both going to have to get a little cleaned up before I'll allow you in the house. I suggest you use the hose."

Negligently, she released Padme from her hold and went back to her kneading. The girl took only seconds to regain her balance, which Acleisst noted with satisfaction. "Aunt Leia," she cried, "Ani is driving me crazy! He threw these awful mudballs at all my friends and me too!"

Almost simultaneously, Ani bellowed "she started it!"

The screaming picked up almost exactly where it left off. Acleisst stopped her motions, closed her eyes and sighed. Then, with a small hand motion, she silenced and froze both children. "That is quite enough! Padme, you are the Queen of this world and Anakin, you are Padawan to one of the most powerful Jedi in the Galaxy. I suggest the two of you begin acting your respective stations, rather than your shoe sizes, NOW. The hose awaits you. Go."

Turning them around, she Force-walked them out the door and closed it behind them, allowing blessed peace to descend. Acleisst looked sourly at the dough she had been pummeling and decided it (and she) had had enough, so she put it in a bowl to rise.

She could faintly hear the hose come on, and the shrieks of both children as the cold water hit their exposed arms and faces, but, thankfully, there were no more voices raised in arguments. A quick scan of their public minds showed them both to be quite abashed by the scolding, which suited her just fine.

After a short time, both came into the room from the cold, shivering and damp, but with the worst of the mud washed off. Acleisst, one eyebrow raised and one hand on her hip, surveyed them critically. "Showers, both of you. Thank the Force this house has two bathing rooms. Put your clothes in these," she held out a plastic bag for each child, "and leave them outside the door to the room. By the time you are finished, I expect dinner to be ready." Her expression told them she would brook no protest, so meekly they took their bags and went to their rooms. "Slunk" would be a good word to describe how they moved.

Obi-Wan returned from Theed about half-hour before dinner to a strangely quiet house. Acleisst was in the kitchen, presiding over several steaming pots and a large brown loaf of bread, freshly baked. He dropped several bundles on the kitchen counter, while looking around quizzically.

"Smells good in here," he said tentatively, "but it's, um, a little quiet? What's happening?"

Acleisst spared him a small smile. "Thank you. Dinner will be ready shortly. The quietness comes from guilt, by the way. We had a small contretemps this afternoon."

"The children?" he asked, surprised.

"The children. Ani was chasing Padme, throwing mud and slush balls with quite remarkable accuracy. I must say, though, he got almost as good as he gave. I sent them both to clean up and then to their rooms."

"What in the world brought this on?" An amused Obi-Wan leaned back against the counter, his arms crossed and a wry little grin playing around his mouth. Acleisst abruptly turned away from him, hoping he did not sense the catch in her breath or the surge of almost sexual response at the sight of him, framed by the light of the setting sun. Her confusion and inner turmoil made her clumsy, and before she realized it, she had splashed scalding water on her hand from lifting the lid of a pot too quickly. She hissed in pain, dropping the lid back down and muttering oaths under her breath.

Immediately, Obi-Wan was solicitous. He grabbed her hand to look at it and moved her to the basin. "Quickly, get it under some cool water. That could cause a blister."

Before either of them could think what was happening, they stood together at the sink. Obi-Wan's arms were around her, both hands holding her scalded one under a stream of tepid water. The feel of him touching her and holding her so closely just made it worse for Acleisst. Her traitorous body wanted to lean into his, her head wanted to turn to his face and lips, but her mind fought for control, to distance herself from the tension she felt. Something of her internal struggle must have been picked up by Obi-Wan; without looking directly at her, the hands holding her scalded one lost their tenseness and became gentler, caressing, his head bent to her hair and to her cheek, not touching her but she could feel his breath on her face. She closed her eyes.

For himself, Obi-Wan had never wanted another person so much in his life. He couldn't believe how fast he could respond to her, even after so much time spent dancing delicately around each other and their feelings. Her now trembling body, wrapped in his arms, felt so good and so right that he never wanted to let go. He didn't understand why they should respond to one another like they did, and did not really care. His lips hovered millimeters above her soft cheek, her eyes were closed and lips parted, her breast rose and fell with increasingly ragged breathing.

For an unknown length of time they stood in a heated tableau. Neither was able to break the embrace, nor able to take it further. The hiss of a pot boiling over finally caused them to remember where they were. Without opening her eyes, Acleisst gaspingly whispered, "pleaseâ€œ|" hoping he would understand. Swallowing, Obi-Wan gently released her hand and cleared his throat.

"I- I'd better go check on Ani," he murmured hoarsely, reluctantly withdrawing from their intimate embrace.

Keeping her eyes closed, she nodded. "I'll need to check up on Padme, too," she whispered.

"Are you all right?" he asked gently, a question which had many meanings.

She turned her head towards him, her eyes still mostly closed. "I'm fine," she murmured, "â€œ| fine. Thank you." Even after he left the

room, it took her quite some time to calm herself down and finish dinner.

Anakin was sitting at the desk in his room, his head propped up on his fists, eyes unfocussed on the wall before him, when his Master tapped on his door. Mentally, he groaned, knowing what was coming even before he allowed entrance to his room. However, when his Master entered the room, he was extremely distracted, and did not even seem to focus on his Padawan.

The older man stood in the doorway, rubbing his hands absently, and did not even seem to see the boy seated before him. Confused, Ani said, "Master, I know what you're going to say and I'm sorry. Aunt Leia already yelled at us. It was all my fault."

Slowly, Obi-Wan focused on his Padawan. "What? Oh. Yes, she told me what had happened." He shook his head in confusion, trying to wrench his mind back onto the matter at hand. "What â€“ what did happen, Ani?"

Anakin heaved a sigh. "Well, I don't, um, exactly know. Pad was sitting with some of her friends, you know, and well, I was with a couple of mine. Evan's sister is one of Pad's friends, and they were making fun of us, I guess, and well, one thing led to anotherâ€!" Anakin trailed off and looked curiously at his Master. He didn't even seem to be paying much attention. Perhaps, the boy thought, I'm going to get off easy this time.

Obi-Wan smiled. He could sense what his Padawan was thinking, and understood all too well the love-hate relationship between Anakin and Padme. Anakin was feeling bad enough about getting into trouble with his "Aunt Leia" and needed no further punishment, except one thing. "All right, Anakin. We'll let it slide this time. I will, however, expect you to give a full apology to Padme over dinner."

The boy rolled his eyes, but agreed. "Good. I'm going to get cleaned up for supper, which should be on the table shortly. I think you could be best served right now by helping to set the table."

With that, a still bemused Obi-Wan left his student's room to take a cold, a very cold, shower.

Acleisst took a bit longer to settle down, but just as dinner was ready, she went to Padme's room and knocked. Her student was sitting on her bed, fingering a small carved japoorn snippet, the one she always wore. She looked up as Acleisst came into the room, and smiled ruefully. "I guess I was pretty bad, huh," she said.

"It wasn't pretty, Padme," Acleisst said gently, sitting down next to her on the bed. "I really thought you were beyond that type of childish behavior."

Embarrassed, Padme looked down at her necklace, not seeing the blurry carvings. "I'm sorry, Aunt Leia. I don't know why but Ani seems to always bring out the worst in me. Why does he do that?"

"Because," Acleisst said, smiling warmly and putting a hand on Padme's shoulder, "you _let_ him. No one can bring out such strong emotions in you if you don't let them, Padme. You and Ani are in an unique positionâ€| you both are strong in the Force and have a strong

attraction to one another. It makes for a volatile situation, and it will only get worse as the two of you get older."

Padme blushed at this assessment, knowing right down to her toes that what Acleisst said was true. Suddenly, her head jerked up to look her mentor in the eye, revelation on her face. "It's like you and Uncle Ben, then, isn't it, Aunt Leia?"

Now, it was Acleisst's turn to flush. The child hit true and very close to home, and no matter how much she wanted to disbelieve the statement, Acleisst knew it was true.

Reluctantly, she nodded. "Yesâ€¦ yes. It is a bit like that, but there's more to our situation. Time will see which path the Force has mapped out for us, Padme. But right now, it's dinner time and I need you in the kitchen."

**

PART SIX

**

Spring finally settled in, and was followed, in due course, by summer. The children grew and learned, pleasing both of their teachers with their progress. Padme spent at least two days of the week on various documents that had to be signed by the Queen, seeking out Acleisst for her advice and knowledge on many occasions. Obi-Wan joked that Acleisst should be paid as a court advisor.

Anakin went through a growth spurt late that summer and shot up to be almost taller than Padme. His voice started cracking now and then as his eleventh year wore on. There were no more arguments between them; indeed, since his growth spurt, Padme seemed almost shy around the boy she had almost come to think of as her brother.

The winter was mild, which disappointed the children eager for more snow sports. Once during the depths of that winter, Mace Windu visited and stayed up late one evening, talking to the children's teachers. They could hear murmured voices long after they went to bed, but in the morning, he was gone.

The winter was so mild that it was difficult to tell when spring started, but it seemed that suddenly, one day, all the trees were in bloom. Padme and Acleisst started spending more time out in the garden, where Acleisst had begun planting some exotic plants to teach Padme about various medicinal and anti-medicinal values. They were working in the dirt the day that the "Customer from Theed" arrived, with a large bundle for them.

It turned out that along with papers for her signature, there was also some music cubes, and Padme was ecstatic. While Acleisst started dinner, before the men came in for the day, Padme put the music on and turned the volume up. The music was strange, wordless, fully orchestrated and in a minor key; Acleisst came out of the kitchen listening with a thoughtful expression on her face.

"I recognize that, I think," she said slowly, dredging memories back up. "It sounds very familiar."

"Oh, isn't it wonderful, Aunt Leia? Sabe sent it to me. It's the latest recording of this wonderful orchestra from Coruscant."

Acleisst nodded her head in time with the music. "Yes, yes it is wonderful. Ah, now I rememberâ€¦ the Grand Senate Ball! My stars, that was, oh, I don't remember how many years ago! This must be a re-recording of old, old music."

Padme stopped her aimless swaying around the room and turned to gape at her teacher. "You've been to a Grand Ball? Oh, my! They only happen once every ten years and I've always wanted to go but I have five more years left! What was it like?"

The older woman laughed at the youngster's breathless astonishment. "Heavens, child, I can barely remember! It was very beautiful, and very, oh, very elegant. Hundreds of species, all dressed in their very best costumes, dancing among the starsâ€!"

"Dancing? Ugh. What's the music up so loud for?" Anakin came into the room, fresh from a shower, his hair still damp.

"Don't you like it, Ani? Sabe sent it to me. Aunt Leia was telling me about the Grand Senate Ballâ€¦ she's been to one! Isn't that exciting?"

Anakin shrugged, listening to the music with one ear cocked. "Yeah, it's all right, I guess, but dancing? No way. You wouldn't catch me doing that, ever."

Smiling mischievously, Acleisst said, "well, then, I think it's time you learned. A Jedi must be conversant in all arts, Ani, dancing included. You'll never know when you'll have to attend a party for Lord High Something-or-Other on behalf of the Jedi in a remote part of the galaxy!"

Ani's face was such a study in shock that both women laughed. Padme said, "c'mon, Ani, I'll show you. It's not hard."

Reluctantly, his revulsion at this turn of events evident on his face, Anakin let Padme take his hands. "Now, this is easy," Padme said, facing him and putting his palms up so she could touch her palms to his. "It's mostly your hands. Move your hands up, that's right, follow me. Now, you move left, and I'll move rightâ€¦ no, keep our hands touching. That's it!"

With awkward movements, Anakin did his best to follow Padme. He had a natural rhythm, which helped, but it was obvious he didn't quite get it. "Here, Padme," Acleisst said, taking pity on the boy, "let's you and I show him how it's done. Like this, Ani," and together, the older and younger women stepped through the first part of the dance. By that time, though, the music had stopped, and Padme hurried to put it back on. Acleisst held out her hands to Anakin, who gingerly stepped up to her.

Showing him helped a bit, but he was still clumsy, and much too short a partner for Acleisst. Laughing again, Acleisst turned him over to Padme as a deeper voice said, "and just what is going on here?"

The three of them turned to see Obi-Wan grinning in the doorway. He

had just showered himself, and was dressed in a fresh jumpsuit. "Oh, Master, I really don't have to learn to _dance_, do I?" Anakin asked plaintively, which brought fresh gales of giggles from Padme.

With mock seriousness, Obi-Wan regarded his Padawan. "But, of course young apprentice. A Jedi must have many skills, dancing included."

Padme, struggling to contain her laughter, said, "oh, Uncle Ben, why don't you show Anakin how? Aunt Leia tried but she's too tall and anyway, she can't leadâ€¦ sorry, Aunt Leia!"

Acleisst laughed at this, and said, "you're right Padme, I'm not good at leading, it wasn't how I was taught."

"All right, then, come here, my Queen," Obi-Wan said, with a florid bow to the young girl. Acleisst started the music again, and watched, bemused, as Obi-Wan and Padme moved haltingly across the floor. It was obvious that, although he knew the dance, Padme knew a later version and they were not meshing well. Anakin watched their steps fiercely, determined to get it right if he had to do it.

Finally the two of them gave up, laughing. "Aunt Leia, here, you partner Uncle Ben and I'll dance with Ani. We can watch you and learn," Padme said, handing Obi-Wan's hand to Acleisst's.

The joviality of the situation had relaxed Acleisst, and it wasn't until Obi-Wan's hand was around hers that she remembered the effect he had on herâ€¦ it was too late. Padme started the music over, and she was face to face with him, their palms touching.

The two were well matched, they were almost the same height and Obi-Wan's light coloring was a good match for the golden-brown woman. Their eyes met, and she once again tumbled into blue-gray depths. Slowly, they stepped through the ancient dance, their bodies touching and swaying to the time of the music. Acleisst was dimly aware that the two younger people were watching and mimicking their steps, laughing and chattering cheerfully.

Obi-Wan forced his mind and body to concentrate on the dance, not on the woman before him, but it was difficult. The particular dance they were doing required their hands to continuously touch, except when the male twirled the female, and at several points had their faces inches from each other. Their movements became slower and slower; finally, they stopped as their faces came so close he felt if he could just lean a little more he could claim those soft lips with his ownâ€¦

She broke away, one hand to her mouth and the other behind her back. "Dinnerâ€¦ my stars, I have to get dinnerâ€¦" she gasped, and fled to the kitchen. He stood and looked after her, an unreadable expression on his face.

Acleisst was still disturbed after the dancing and had managed to avoid Obi-Wan all evening until bedtime. She turned off lights in the house and automatically checked systems, a routine that soothed her. She looked in on Padme, who was getting ready to climb into bed. The girl looked at her with her customary penetrating stare.

"Goodnight, Aunt Leia," she said, "are you all right?"

"Yes love, thank you," Acleisst replied, smiling gently. "I'm fine. Sleep well."

Her next stop was Ani, who was reading by the light of his bed lamp. "Don't stay up too late, Ani," she said.

"I won't, I promise," Ani replied, flashing her a quick smile. "I just want to finish this section. Goodnight, Aunt Leia."

"Goodnight, dear one. Sleep well."

The next room down the hall was Obi-Wan's. She expected his door to be closed, but it wasn't. He stood at his window, hands clasped behind his back, staring thoughtfully out over the darkening city of Theed. He obviously was in the midst of getting ready for bed for he was dressed only in his trousers. He turned as Acleisst reached his door, their eyes met and her breath stopped. She broke contact first, though, and found herself outside on the terrace without really remembering how she got there. She put her scarf around her head to protect against the cool, gentle breeze that blew.

She felt him before she heard him behind her.

"I sense your turmoil, Cless. I've sensed it and your pain for a long time, now. Please, let me help?"

Acleisst bowed her head, not willing to face him again. "Oh Obi-Wan! I'm sorry. These past two years must have been so hard on you."

He smiled, not with his eyes, and said, "perhaps, but not as hard for me as for you, I think. Cless, please let me help you. I know what you must have gone through!"

"I've been avoiding it, avoiding telling you, but you knew that, didn't you." He nodded at her perception. "I suppose it's time" and maybe past time "to fill you in on the real story" of when the Jedi council met the Sith before and the role I played in it."

"Yoda told me some of it!" he began, leaning, like her, on the balcony rail and looking out at the darkening city on the horizon.

"That little green toad would like to forget it," she interrupted mildly. "It was a long time ago, a very long time ago, but it feels to me like yesterday. The pain is still fresh. I was married then, you see."

Obi-Wan started. "You? Married? A Jedi?"

She smiled. "Yes, a Jedi. It's not expressly forbidden, just discouraged; especially when it's a Jedi to a Jedi. He was!" she swallowed against the lump in her throat. "everything, to me, as I was to him. He had a young Padawan named Qui-Gon Jinn, who showed great promise."

This second shock rocked Obi-Wan. "Y-you're saying my master was your husband's Padawan? That would mean you're!"

"Older than I look. Yes, looks can be deceiving." She smiled, sadly, out of the corner of her mouth, still refusing to look at him. She could sense his bewilderment, his unsteadiness as he absorbed this information. "Qui-Gon was just a young boy, very strong in the arts, and learning rapidly, when the Sith made their move. Always two there areâ€œ a master and an apprentice, a Padawan, we would say. The councilâ€œ Obst and I were on it thenâ€œ we decided to attack. You see, this was the first time in almost a thousand years that the Sith were known of in the galaxy. The last time, they almost aided us in their destructionâ€œ well, you know the histories. This time, we thought if we took the fight to their citadel, with all the other Jedi, that we could make an easy win. We were wrong. We won, but it wasn't easy, and that's why this battle doesn't appear in any of the Jedi texts. We were all a little ashamed of our actions, of our defeat."

Acleisst stared out at the darkness, seeing in her mind's eye that terrible day. "Yoda, Adi and Ki with the others took on the guards, human and droid. Mace, Obst and I were to take down the automatic defenses. We were expected; the control room was heavily defended and the apprentice was there, leading. He wounded Mace before Obst killed him. We got Mace stabilized with a med-droid and went further inâ€œ we were confident, you see, that we'd have reinforcements shortly." She shook her head and Obi-Wan could hear the faint jingle of her hair under the scarf. "We were wrong. At every turn he anticipated us. Yoda's forces were tied up by the mercenaries he had hired. Obst and I were alone when we faced him, and heâ€œ he killed Obst."

Though he was expecting this, Obi-Wan still felt shock. She was silent so long, and in so much palpable pain, he hated to speak, but finally whispered, "then what happened?"

"Then, I lost control. The rageâ€œthere is pain, and fear, and hatred, but they pale before the rage I felt. Obst stayed with me; it was the only way I managed to stay sane, stay one with the Force. Ultimately, it was the rage that defeated the Sith Lord, not me. He did not fight with a lightsaber, or any other weapon but his mind, which is what I had to use to defeat him." She turned then, and looked him in the face though still avoiding his eyes. The pain she displayed was such that Obi-Wan could almost not bear to look at her. "I never want to feel that again," she added evenly, levelly, in a low voice. "It was beyond horrible."

This time, it was he who turned from her; the naked pain and horror in her eyes too much for him. "I-I can understand, a little, then, why you would feel like you do."

She turned back to her contemplation of the darkness. "No, that's not all there is to it. You see, Arum, Saesee's mother/father, was on the council then, and it could see better than any of us what the paths might lead to. It saw all paths and their branches, and helped us find the true way many times. It told the council we were not done with the Sith yet, but none of us wanted to believe it. It told me, personally, that I was not done with the Sith yet. And it told meâ€œ"

Acleisst's voice trailed off. Not wanting to break the moment, Obi-Wan said nothing and let her proceed at her own pace. Eventually,

her head down, she continued, and her voice was low and thick with tears. "It told me that were I ever to love again, love a Jedi, that my doom would be before me. Obst's death was so raw, I thought it could never happen. I exiled myself from the council to ensure it would never happen. But now!"

"Now, the council and the Sith have forced you back. It all makes sense now. I'm so sorry." Obi-Wan's own voice was as raw as hers, only with sympathy.

"There's more." Slowly, reluctantly, she forced herself to turn toward him. One hand pushed her scarf away from the eyes that hesitantly, finally, met his. "From the first time we touched on our way to Naboo, and now every time I look in your eyes, I see my doom_. I see my doom_, Obi-Wan."

Obi-Wan couldn't move or breathe and his heart stopped beating. All he saw and felt was there in her eyes, her deep, golden-brown eyes swimming with unshed tears. He slowly reached out a hand and touched her face, the dear, beautiful face that had been haunting his dreams and thoughts since he first saw it. Not taking her eyes from his, she laid the flat of her palm on his sweat slicked chest, felt his heart racing, as quickly as her own.

"My doom lies in you, Obi-Wan Kenobi. I know it is so, though I have fought it. But I can fight it no more."

"Then don't." His own light tenor broke, and he swallowed hard to clear his throat. "Don't fight it, Cless. Know that â€“ know that I love you."

She smiled, a tremulously sad little smile, and whispered, "I know."

His other hand joined the first, to cradle her face, as he leaned in to kiss her; gently, then, gradually, more deeply and passionately. One small part of his brain noted with absurd pleasure how easy it was to kiss her since they were almost of a height, and how good it felt to have her body mold to his, her hands on his naked back. One of his hands tangled in her bell tipped hair while the other pulled her as close to him as was humanly possible. The kiss grew deeper as their tongues explored each other's mouths while their hands explored each other's bodies. Obi-Wan felt an ache develop in his groin that was at once familiar and new, and pulled her body even more tightly to him, moaning imperceptibly. Acleisst felt the hardness between his legs as his hands crushed her lower back and buttocks to him; it brought back sweet memories that she didn't even try to suppress. It had been so long since she had felt a man in this way; her breasts ached and her own groin was running with moisture as she ran her hands down his back to explore the waistband of his pants.

So entrapt were they in each other's emotions and sensuous pleasure that at first they did not note the jarring heat in the Force that intruded itself between them. But a sudden, strangled cry from Padme broke them apart as much as a bomb would. While still touching, they sent out a combined tendril of sense to feel the slimy presence of the Sith lord.

"Ani!" gasped Acleisst, starting for the door to the house. Keeping one of his hands firmly clasped around one of hers, Obi-Wan raced

with Acleisst into the house, down the hall to Anakin's room. Padme stood in the doorway framed by a harsh greenish light, her hands were pressed to her mouth and her eyes were wide with fear. The two of them gently shouldered her aside to see Anakin, on his bed, his face a frozen mask and a sickly greenish nimbus surrounding his body. Obi-Wan started to go to his Padawan, but Acleisst grabbed him.

"NO! It's the Sith trying to break through the shield I put in place. If you touch him, you'll be drawn in too. We need to take it back to the source and stop him."

"How?" moaned Obi-Wan, futilely clenching his fists at the sight of his Padawan in trouble.

Acleisst looked back at Padme, who was still standing in the doorway in shock. Quickly crossing the distance between them, Acleisst put her hands on the girl's shoulders, gently shaking her. "Padme, Padme, listen to me. I need you now. You must control your emotionsâ€| do as I have taught you, breathe. That's right. Look at me, focus on me, breathe. Get yourself under control."

The older woman could feel the girl struggling for control and helped her just enough to get the process started. Gradually, Padme's breath came more steadily, her eyes lost the wild look. Her fear was still there, but under control.

"Good girl. Now, you'll need to help us help Ani. Are you ready?"

Padme nodded raggedly. "I think so. Aunt Leia, what is that thing? What's happening?"

"It's the Sith trying to break through the shield. I'm not sure why he picked Ani but he has, and we need to follow his thread back to the source and cut it off. I need you and Ben to reinforce the shield so I can cut the thread."

"Cless, you can'tâ€| the Sith will feel youâ€|" Obi-Wan's voice was frantic, and Padme echoed him.

"I can't, Aunt Leia, not without youâ€|"

"Yes, you can. Both of you. Now, join with me."

Acleisst's no-nonsense tone of voice helped, more than anything, to get the other two under better control. Each took a hand and completed the circle, standing in Ani's room near but not touching him.

"Obi-Wan, I'm going to show you the shield; Padme, you will have to help him find it and maintain it. Remember, he is a male and is unused to this type of Force manipulation." All three closed their eyes, better to see within, and felt, rather than heard, Acleisst tell them what to do. "There. Do you see it, Obi-Wan?"

"Yes," he thought back. The way he saw it was like a bubble made up of other bubbles; he was in one, the children were each in their own, and all the bubbles touched. One, Ani's, was under attack from a thin strand of light coming from the darkness outside.

"Padme, show him what to do," Acleisst thought.

Taking a deep breath, Padme thought and felt instructions at the man she called Uncle Ben. Together, they merged their bubbles, and, as Obi-Wan saw it, surrounded Ani's bubble with their own. Acleisst's bubble moved apart, and suddenly, it " and she " wasn't there any more.

Obi-Wan started to panicâ€| he could not feel her presence. But, surprisingly, Padme was there, calming him. "Don't worry, Uncle Ben; she's still here. She's following the thread back to it's source. Stay with meâ€| I can't do this alone!"

Reassured, he soothed himself and her with as much calming thoughts as he could manage. The two of them merged deeper, until they were almost one being, surrounding Ani with their love and the Force of their will, fighting off the evil green light.

As suddenly as it started, it was over. The light vanished. In their thoughts, Ani came back to himself as a separate presence; he "looked around" and saw the two of them merged, hovering over him. "What's happening?" he thought, puzzled at the way his Master and Padme were joined.

Reluctantly, they separated, and slowly came back to themselves. Acleisst's presence was there again, her smallish bubble again joined with theirs, and in the agony of separating from Padme Obi-Wan did not notice how much weaker it looked than before.

Slowly, the room formed around them again. The three of them were still joined by their hands but Ani was standing on the edge of their circle baffled and a little alarmed. Padme blinked at Obi-Wan.

"We were joined, weren't we, Uncle Ben?" she asked softly, her eyes shining. Then, suddenly, she noticed Ani. "Ani! Are you all right?"

He shrugged off her hand on his arm. "I'm fine! Will someone please tell me what just happened?"

Acleisst's voice was very weak. "The Sithâ€| tried to get youâ€| Aniâ€| what were you reading, you sillyâ€| boyâ€| " If Obi-Wan hadn't maintained a grip on her hand, he might not have been able to catch her when she fell.

**

PART SEVEN

**

Acleisst came back to herself slowly, aware she was in her bed in her darkened room and would have been comfortable if not for the raging pain eating her head. Before she could even moan, an arm slipped under her neck and gently lifted her shoulders. A cupful of a bitter liquid was introduced to her lips, which she swallowed quickly.

"An analgesic," a soft voice, Obi-Wan's, said. "Padme said you would be hurting. Here's some water to wash down the taste."

The water was cold and good, and Acleisst sipped it gratefully. She relaxed then against the arm under her shoulders, and waited patiently for the analgesic to take effect. She heard Obi-Wan's breath on her hair; felt his slow, steady pulse under her neck and smelled the clean sweat of his body so close to hers.

Gradually, the pain lessened under the dual onslaught of the drug and Jedi mind control. Still keeping her eyes shut against even the dimmest of lights, she murmured, "the children?"

"Asleep. I had to do some fast talking and eventually had to use threats, but Padme finally left your side after exacting a promise from me about how to treat you." Gently, slowly, he shifted his weight until he was laying beside her on the bed, his left arm still cradling her head and neck. "Ani is totally confused, and I sense some odd layer of jealousy there too, but I'll have to examine that later."

"Mmmmm," she acknowledged, relishing the warmth and comfort of his body next to hers. "You feel so good," she slurred, unthinking.

"So do you," he whispered. "I thought I'd lost you, Cless, just when I had found you."

Slowly, her eyes opened and gradually focused on anguish-filled blue-gray eyes above her. Her hands felt like lead, but she managed to lift one to push his braided hair tail back behind his ear; then had to let it fall again. "I'll never leave you," she whispered, lost in his eyes.

Gently, softly, he leaned to her and kissed her sweet lips. When he came back up, her eyes were opened wide. "The Sith. By the Force. Obi-Wan, he's here."

His arm tightened around her shoulders, and the love in his eyes was replaced with wariness. "What? Here, in the house?"

"No," she grimaced. "On the planet. We have to get to Theed."

He shook his head sharplyâ€| the motion made her gasp with pain. "You're not going anywhere tonight. Is the shield secure? No, don't feel for it, let me carry you to it."

With new-found confidence, Obi-Wan gently merged with her and let her ride his mind like a child riding piggy-back. They looked at the newly strengthened shield, then came back to their bodies. Upon returning to their physical bodies, both noticed that the pain in Acleisst's head had very nearly vanished.

"It's fine," she said, "and after the spanking I gave him, he won't be able to do much for a few days. You're rightâ€| he still may not know _where_ we are, and I don't want to give us away by racing back to Theed in a panic."

"All right," he agreed gratefully, "then I'll notify Captain Panaka that we'll go back in two days. Meanwhile, I'll let Yoda know to be on the alert."

He started to shift, to withdraw his arm from under her, but she stopped him. "Where are you going?" she asked softly.

"I need to use the comm unit, and you need to rest after what you just went through. I wasn't joking, Cless, I don't want to take the chance of losing you."

She put one hand on his naked shoulder, then caressed his face. "It's late, and I'm sure Yoda is sleeping, if that little green toad ever sleeps. Stay with me, tonight, please? We can call in the morning, and I â€“ I don't want to be alone."

His breath catching, he looked down into her eyes, now filled with what he hoped was love. "Are you sure, Cless?"

"Yes. Lie here with me tonight and we'll let tomorrow take care of itself."

Not taking his eyes from hers, he settled back down, shifting his body carefully until both arms were comfortably embracing her and her head was cradled on his shoulder. Her hair smelled wonderful.

The two of them lay like that for some time, gently exploring the other's public mind and communing without speaking. Acleisst's right hand caressed the right arm Obi-Wan had wrapped around her; his right hand tightly clasped her left. Gently, sweetly, he kissed her jaw and neck, breathing deeply of her calming and exciting aura. He was having a difficult time containing his desire for her but knew that, after all she had been through, the last thing she needed was a sex-crazed Jedi trying to attack her.

Something of this must have leaked into his "public" mind, or perhaps it was a male muscle with a mind of its own intruding, because she chuckled softly, deep in her throat. He was glad she could not clearly see his face, for he was sure it was glowing in the dark.

"Don't worry about it love," she murmured. "It may have taken me a while to realize where my heart was leading me, but I know, now. Our time is coming. But at the moment, you're right, I couldn't do anything but sleep. So, sleep, my love, sleep."

The fact that she called him "love" brought tears to his eyes and an incredible burst of happiness to his heart. Shifting slightly to relieve a little cramp in his arm, he nestled tightly against her and both reveled in and ignored the ache in his groin until it went away with his drifting to sleep. They slept that way, nestled together like spoons, the rest of the night; when he woke, she was gone but her pillow still carried her odor.

Obi-Wan went back to his own room for his robe; he smelled breakfast and heard voices coming from the great room so knew the children were up. He knew he needed to bathe but the strenuous activity of the night before had left him ravenous and unable to wait for food. He walked into the great room to find Acleisst sitting at one end of the table, flanked by Ani on one side and Padme on the other. All three had half-empty plates in front of them; a third plate was sitting, covered, on the countertop near the table.

Acleisst, facing the doorway to the hall, saw him first and all his repressed tension vanished as her face lit up at the sight of him.

"We thought you would be sleeping forever my dear!" Acleisst exclaimed. Obi-Wan kept his eyes locked on her as he made his way around the table and so missed the worshipful and adoring little smile on Padme's face at the sight of him ¯ and the glowering frown on Ani's as he saw Padme's face. When he reached the older woman's seat, Obi-Wan took one of her hands in his and kissed it. He still kept his eyes on hers, and smiled slightly to see the blush on her cheeks.

"Your breakfast is on the counter there, keeping warm, if you'd like it," she said.

"Thank you, love," he said casually, and noted with pleasure her eyes widening at his off-hand use of the word. He leaned on the back of her chair ¯ still keeping hold of her hand ¯ and faced the other two in the room. "And how are you two this morning? Recovered from last night, I hope?"

"Ani had two helpings, so I think he's all right," Padme said, giggling. Obi-Wan turned quizzical eyes on his Padawan.

"What's the matter, Ani?" he asked.

"I wish someone would tell me exactly what happened last night," Ani said sourly. "I sure didn't feel anything like Padme describes, and Aunt Leia hasn't talked about it!"

"I haven't talked about it because I've been busy feeding your greedy gut, dear," Acleisst teased mildly, smiling. "But if you want to talk about it now, we can, while your Master eats. Does that improve your mood?"

Anakin knew he was behaving badly, but he felt in a poor mood and didn't really understand why. Remembering what he had been taught, he turned inward to find his center and breathed deeply. It didn't help. "I guess so, Aunt Leia. Anything would help!"

Acleisst waited until Obi-Wan sat down with his breakfast before beginning. "First, let me ask you, Ani," she said, "what were you reading last night before you went to bed?"

The boy cast his mind back to the evening before ¯ when his "Aunt Leia" had looked in on him before bed. "Um ¯ . I was reading the histories. I think it was in the section devoted to the dark side."

"Specifically, about one of the Sith uprisings, maybe?" she asked.

"I ¯ I think so. Yeah. I do remember reading that."

"That's what I suspected. You read that just before falling asleep, and your dreams were all about the battles against the dark side and the Sith, yes?"

"Well, now that you mention it," Anakin said thoughtfully. "Just before I woke up, I remember a strange dream about a huge man all in black who carried a red lightsaber, and heard harsh breathing. The next thing I knew, you three were standing over my bed."

Obi-Wan and Acleisst exchanged glances, but Acleisst continued. "Your reading about the dark side somehow made it a bit easier for it to come to you, specifically, for the Sith lord to find you. He tried to break through the shield I've raised to protect all of us, using your dreams as his conduit. He attacked, and the attack disabled you, which is why you don't remember it. Padme, Obi-Wan and I joined to strengthen the shield, and while the two of them were maintaining it, I followed the force line back to the Sith and severed it."

"Oh." Anakin did not really know how to respond to that, so he said nothing else, just looked thoughtful.

"Aunt Leia," Padme said, "is that why you passed out? Didâ€| um, he cause that?"

"No, Padme," Acleisst said, "the Sith did not cause that. It was caused by the mental energy I expended in chastising the Sith lord for his impertinence in attacking Anakin."

Both children were taken a bit aback at the matter-of-fact tone she took at this, but Obi-Wan smiled. He was just finally beginning to understand the level of devotion she had to her quasi-family.

"Well, then," Ani ventured, "you should at least know who he is now, right?"

She shook her head sadly. "Unfortunately, no, Anakin. I will, if we ever come face to face, but I really hope that won't happenâ€| it's too dangerous. He was able to shield his public mind from me sufficiently for me not to see his self-image."

Padme and Anakin looked at each other from across the table. Their dismay was evident on their faces. Obi-Wan stopped eating long enough to speak. "Regardless, our cover I think is blown here. Cless has determined that he's on the planetâ€| probably in Theed. We'll need to return tomorrow."

The children's depression deepened with this pronouncement, but they were too well trained to argue. They knew it was necessary, but also knew they didn't have to like it.

"I'll miss this house," Padme said, her chin quivering.

"Me, too," Anakin agreed.

"I will, too," Acleisst said. "We've had almost two wonderful years here, though, and to be honest, we were lucky for that. Nearly every day for a year I've been expecting something like this." She smiled at Padme and Ani, reached out and took their hands. "My darlings, I've never been so close to a real family as I have been with the four of us. As long as we have the memory of here, we will always be here."

Acleisst looked up and included Obi-Wan in her gaze. He smiled at her, a bit sadly. "I know," he said, "and my thoughts too will be here for a long time to come. None of us know what direction the paths will take, so we must all hold on to good parts of the past. The past is what makes us who we are."

Finished with his breakfast, Obi-Wan rose and put his dishes and cutlery away. He came back to stand again behind Acleisst, putting his hand on her shoulder. "I'm going to call now to set up our return for tomorrow. I think today might be best spent trying to determine which things we want to take with us."

And so the rest of the day passed in nostalgia and sadness. Each of them had mementos they wanted to keep of their time together, and there were other things to pack and ship, like the hundreds of books they had amassed together.

By the end of the day, dinnertime was a sober affair. Obi-Wan confirmed that Panaka would be at the house the next day to bring them all back to Theed. A transport had already arrived and taken almost everything that wasn't immediately necessary, including books and some furniture. The rest would be left for the new buyers of the house.

Acleisst made a special dinner, and Padme made an extra gooey dessert loved by both men in the house, but even that did little to cheer the mood. There was little to do after dinner but the dishes and finish packing, so all retired early.

With a sense of deja-vu, Acleisst walked through the darkened house, checking doors, windows and systems for the last time. Padme met her at her door and gave her a wordless hug before climbing into bed. Ani's door was shut. Acleisst could sense he not asleep but not open to visitors, and she respected his need for privacy.

Finally, she was at Obi-Wan's door. Like the last time, he stood at the window, naked to the waist, sadly contemplating the darkness. He did not turn as she came into the room, closing the door behind her; she walked over to him and wrapped her arms around his waist, resting her cheek on his shoulder.

He turned in her embrace and wordlessly kissed her, deeply and passionately. She broke the embrace first, gently stepping far enough away to untie her robe and let it slip to the floor. Obi-Wan gasped at the sight of her naked and glowing before him, before letting his mouth be captured again by hers. It felt even better to kiss her naked than to kiss her clothed, and he was having an increasingly difficult time controlling himself.

Still within his embrace, Acleisst undid his pants and helped him slip them off. Their eager hands explored each other's hidden crevasses, their mouths kissed and licked each other's skin in delicate places. Finally, just as Obi-Wan was certain he was going to explode, she led him to the bed. She broke the embrace by climbing on it, then sat on her knees, facing him.

"Obi-Wan," she began huskily, "I need to ask you some questions, and they're rather embarrassing, do you mind?"

He nodded, not trusting his voice to speak. She continued, "are you a virgin?"

Obi-Wan blinked, surprised by this question, and a bit disconcerted. "Well, ah, no, but it was a long time agoâ€œ! Qui-Gon told me that I should just get used to celibacyâ€œ!"

She grimaced. "He would say that. No, that is not exactly what I meant although that is part of itâ€|you've never had anyone strong in the force make love to you?"

Mystified, he shook his head no. "Why, Cless?"

She took a deep breath, lifting her heavy breasts and totally exploding what was left of Obi-Wan's concentration.

"There are a few things we must do first, then I will teach you, the same way I was taught."

"By your husband," he said softly, tenderly.

She nodded. "Yes. By the only, other, man I have ever loved." She could feel his happiness at her use of that term, and smiled. "First, we must check on the shield coherencyâ€| once we are, um, engaged, we won't be able to react with any alacrity to an emergency. Then, we must erect a barrier around this room, and us, so that the children cannot interrupt us easily." His eyes got wide, and she smiled more broadly. "Don't worry, I'll show you how. Take my hands."

Lightly merged, they swiftly checked on and reinforced the shield protecting the children, then, with her showing him, erected a specialized shield around their room and themselves. When they were done, Obi-Wan expected her to break the link; instead, she delicately merged herself deeper with him, gently probing at his private mind and exposing hers to his scrutiny.

He could feel her, on myriad levels; on the top her mouth kissed and licked his face, neck, chest, penis, leaving a trail of fire in its wake. In his mind, her mind's hands, face and eyes stroked and caressed, probed and fondled, leaving him gasping.

"This is how Jedi love," she thought to him, laying herself even more bare to him. "Join me, join with me, become one with me, my love."

She taught him then, things that he had never learned under Qui-Gon. One part of him knew when he entered her, heard her gasp and felt her slick tightness. Another part of him groaned at the control she exerted over him, keeping him teetering on the edge of the abyss without falling in. When he finally climaxed, it was as if an explosion went off in his brain, burning both of them with intense heat and glory. He slammed, bellowing, back into his physical body; he was prone on the bed with Acleisst impaled upon him, screaming her own orgasm. Their hands were still locked together, his back was arched and her head was thrown back in the throes of passion. He felt as if he would die.

Slowly the heat dissipated, the pulses died down, and she sank down to his chest, gasping and still joined with him, body and mind. They lay like that for a while, reveling in the feel and pleasure of each other's body, seeing in each other the differences and similarities in male and female orgasms. He sent a small tendril of thought out to her, and felt her twine herself around it. "Now you see why the room needed to be shielded," she thought, smiling in her mind.

Freeing his hands from hers, he tenderly explored every part of her he could reach, from the soaking area where they were still joined,

up her back to her neck. She lifted herself partially off his chest to look into his eyes, and his hands moved to her breasts and belly. Her nipples were dark and erect, and she closed her eyes when he rubbed them; he could see and feel in her mind how good it felt. Finally, his hands moved to cradle her face; he stared deeply into her eyes. "Teach me more, beloved Master," he thought, falling forever into golden brown depths, "I never wish to leave this room again."

Her glorious eyes filled with love and passion, she kissed him, beginning to move her body and open herself to him again. He was a fast learner; although most of the ecstatic cries that came from the room that night were his, many were not.

And in the morning, Panaka was there with a small escort to accompany them back to Theed and their duties.

Theed hadn't changed much in the two years they had been gone, Ani reflected. He sat at the side of one of the many small fountains, in a inner courtyard of the Theed palace, and absently tossed pebbles into the water.

Plop. He remembered again his surprise the day of their departure to see Aunt Leia and his Master emerging from the same bedroom. Even their auras seemed different, warmer, somehow. And they wouldn't stop touching each other, or looking at each other. When he mentioned it to Padme, she just smiled mysteriously. "I think it's sweet," she said, exasperating him further.

Plop. He remembered their homecoming to the palace, and how at least a thousand or maybe a million handmaidens surrounded Padme and hustled her off, giggling and gasping. The look of alarmed panic on her face was hilarious, but Ani could still remember it was at his Master she looked last, not at him.

Plop. He remembered his appearance to the council, before all the other masters. Even though he had grown, even though he felt his progress was good, he still felt like little more than a bug before them, especially Master Windu. Anakin had never felt comfortable around the big, black man, ever since he had so causally dismissed him from council training more than two years ago.

Plop. He also remembered the looks of astonishment towards his Master and Aunt Leia from the other members of the council, and tried again to puzzle it out. It was clear to Anakin from the start that they were meant for one another, and he had always been able to sense the love there. That it presented a problem for them he could sense, but he didn't understand it. In his just-pre-pubescent world, there was no such thing as inappropriate love or unreciprocated love. Love was love, and that's all there was to it. He finally decided it must have had something to do with the fact that they spent the night in the same room.

Plop. A memory that he didn't want to think about surfaced; Padme's face looking at his Master's after the Sith attack. He could tell no. He wouldn't go there. Padme was like his sister, he thought stubbornly to himself, that and nothing more. She was a Queen by the Force and he was just the son of a slave.

Plop. And then he had been unceremoniously deposited here, to sit in

boredom, while his two Masters continued to meet with the council and talked about the Sith. He wanted to be there; after all, it was him the Sith attacked, and he could help.

Plop. Plop. Then, footsteps behind him, and a genial, oily voice. "Why, young Skywalker, isn't it? What a pleasant surprise meeting you here."

Yoda and Mace met privately with Obi-Wan and Acleisst, after the two had given a brief formal report to the council. Obi-Wan had parked Anakin at a small fountain just outside the wing of the palace where the Jedi stayed, with stern warnings not to move until he returned. He could sense the frustration within his Padawan, but knew that the boy would obey his instructions. The four Jedi talked for some time, while Acleisst filled Mace and Yoda in more thoroughly on the events of the past two years.

"Where is the rest of the council?" Acleisst asked, taking a small cup of steaming liquid from Yoda. Several members, Ki Adi Mundi among them, were absent when she and Obi-Wan had made their returning report.

"Ki, Eeth and a few others remain on Coruscant," Mace told her, sipping from his own cup. "Yoda and I have had many conversations with them, and we are not exactly pleased at what they are doing."

Obi-Wan looked from Master to Master, concern on his face. "What's happening? The last time I was in Theed, you were all together and I didn't sense anything wrong. Now though!"

Yoda sighed, settling on his favorite low chair, his own cup in his claw. "Division there is. Unfortunate, yes. Much ambition in Ki there is now."

While Obi-Wan absorbed this in shock, Acleisst nodded her head slowly. "Yes, I sensed that two years ago. I don't know why, but I distrusted Ki then, and I do more so now. Do you think he's turned to the dark side?"

"By all the stars in the galaxy, I hope not," said Mace, with heartfelt emotion. "Ki has been a good friend. But Yoda's right, he's become quite ambitious and has helped the bureaucracy and Palpatine's forces without even consulting the Council."

"Wait and see, we must," said Yoda. "The paths he will take will tell us, hmm?"

"And speaking of paths," Mace continued, looking pointedly at the younger Jedi, "I see you have found your own. Are you sure in this, Cless?"

Acleisst reached out and took Obi-Wan's hand. "Yes," she said softly, "we are joined now, for better or for worse, blackheart."

"Love can't be an evil thing, Mace," agreed Obi-Wan, bringing her hand to his mouth to kiss her fingers, "and I love Cless. We'll stand together against the Sith."

Mace's face drooped, looking so much like Yoda's that Acleisst smiled

despite herself. "I know what you're thinking, blackheart," she said, "and it may be true. But I cannot deny my destiny in this, just as I could not earlier. We will walk the paths that come before us together."

Standing, Yoda walked to the couple and placed one claw on their joined hands. "Sure you are in this path, then?"

Both Acleisst and Obi-Wan looked at each other then at Yoda. "Yes," they chimed together.

"Then bless it I do. May the path you walk together be a long one."

Acleisst put her cup down and hugged Yoda. "Thank you, old toad," she said, her voice thick with tears. "With you by our sides, we will be fine."

Clearing his throat, Mace spoke through the pain and misgivings he felt. "I am happy for you both, but we have a crisis here. Cless, have you had time to determine who this Sith is?"

Turning her mind back to the matters at hand, Acleisst shook her head. "No. But we've only just arrived. I have plans to walk around the palace to see if I can sense him anywhere specific."

"Alone, you will not," said Yoda sharply. "Start a new war you could, yes."

"No, I'll go with her," Obi-Wan said, "I think I can keep her out of trouble," he added, grinning at his lover.

"As if you could, pretty boy," she said, laughing. "More likely the other way around."

"And I'll go with you too," Mace said, trying his best to lift his mood away from thoughts of catastrophe. "Why don't we go now. I'd like to visit the Queen, and see for myself what you have done with her, Cless."

"No others in the council know I was training her, correct?" Acleisst asked worriedly.

"No, told no one we did," Yoda confirmed. "Go with you I will not. Stay here I will and think. Too old for this I am."

This brought laughter from all three of the others. "Yoda, the day you are old is the day the galaxy will stop spinning," Acleisst said, smiling at her friend. "Let's go gentlemen, we can pick up Anakin on our way to keep him out of trouble. I don't know why I feel so calm and happyâ€| I should smell the trouble on the wind."

"That's just Yoda's nervous sweat," Mace said lightly. What he did not say was that it was also his nervous sweat, as a dread he couldn't shake gathered around his heart.

**

PART EIGHT

**

Anakin turned to see the tall First Chancellor moving towards him from the shadows of the archway. Scrambling to his feet, he bowed deeply to Palpatine. "Uh, I'm sorry, sir, I didn't hear you coming," he stammered, nervously.

Palpatine laughed, and waved at him to sit back down. "Oh, not to worry, boy, not to worry. Mind if I join you? It's been a while since I saw you last."

Smiling nervously in the presence of the Senator, Anakin said, "um, yes sir. I've been in training to be a Jedi."

"Ah. Well, good for you. I had heard, of course, that you would be trained, and I thought it wonderful. As I said before, I'll be following your career with great interest, my boy, great interest. You show much promise."

The presence of the tall man made Anakin inexplicably nervous. He had no idea what to say to him, and wished with all his might that his Master would show up to rescue him. "Thank you, sir, I hope to make a good Jedi Knight, someday," he finally said lamely.

"Oh, well, I'm sure that is a fine ambition," the Senator said lightly, "but don't forget, Jedi lives are very circumspect, very limited. You have talent, boy, and I wouldn't want it to go to waste."

Anakin swelled with pride to hear these words from so important a man, and felt very privileged. "Thank you sir," he repeated, "but I'm just a good pilot."

"Nonsense, my boy," contradicted Palpatine, smiling broadly, "you single-handedly saved Naboo! I wouldn't call that being 'just a good pilot.' Make sure you don't limit your choices."

While the two of them talked, Acleisst, Mace and Obi-Wan approached the sunlit area from the other archway. Coming around a corner, Acleisst had a clear view of the courtyard and saw who was sitting with Anakin. Immediately, she gasped and sagged, holding on to one of the large pillars for support. Mace was at her side, holding her up, and Obi-Wan took her arm, starting to ask what was wrong. Without words, she shushed both of them, and managed to stagger back into the shadows, pulling all three away from the courtyard.

"It's him!" she gasped, viciously clamping down on the panic in her mind. Obi-Wan's eyes grew large, and he too struggled to lock down his feelings. Mace, his sense of dread nearly overwhelming, peered around the column into the courtyard.

"Chancellor Palpatine! I should have known," he hissed, mentally kicking himself.

"You couldn't have known," Acleisst whispered, her back against the pillar and panting in her effort to get herself under control. "I wouldn't have known either if I hadn't struggled with him, mind to mind."

"Palpatine?" Obi-Wan gulped, also peering around the column.

"Palpatine's the Sith? How is thatâ€¦he's talking to Anakin! I have to get over there!"

"Not like that, you're not," snapped Mace quietly. He let go of Acleisst and grabbed Obi-Wan by one shoulder in a crushing grip. "Get yourself under control, Jedi. If he senses you know him, Anakin is dead."

The absolute flatness of Mace Windu's pronouncement galvanized Obi-Wan. He looked to his lover for support, and her anguished eyes met his. "It's true, Obi-Wan. If he sensesâ€¦"

"Then he can't. Help me, Cless, please?" The gentle plea in his voice and eyes almost brought her to tears.

"Yes. Join with me now, love. I'll help you." The two of them lightly joined, feeding each other calming thoughts, helping to quiet and control. To their surprise, they felt the very large, strong presence of Mace Windu joining them, adding his strength to their resolve. Very shortly, all three were under control and completely blocked.

"I can't go with you," Acleisst said softly. "He might know me, and I'd be too exposed. The only way I could face him is in a room full of other Jedi."

Obi-Wan nodded shortly. "You're right. I'll go fetch Anakin. You two go back to get Yoda, then we should meet with the others in the council room."

Mace withdrew his hand from the younger man's arm. "The Force go with you, Obi-Wan. Remember, you are not here to fight him."

"I know. I'll see you all in the council room shortly."

Breathing deeply, Obi-Wan watched the other two withdraw. Slowly he turned towards the courtyard, still breathing, readying himself. After a moment, he strode purposely towards his Padawan. "Anakin," he called, as he came out into the sunlit area. He stopped as he saw Palpatine sitting at the fountain with his student, laughed shortly and bowed. "My Padawan is keeping great company, I see. Greetings, Chancellor Palpatine. I hope Anakin hasn't been a bother to you."

Palpatine turned and raked Obi-Wan up and down with his eyes. There was power there, and malice, barely held in check. Deep in the recesses of his mind, Obi-Wan screamed in defiance and fear, understanding at last what it was like to confront a Sith. His mind shield held though, and Palpatine at last dismissed him with his eyes. "On the contrary, Jedi Knight, young Skywalker is a quite remarkable young man."

Obi-Wan heard and felt the menace in those words, but allowed none of his panic or anger bleed through his rigidly controlled mind lock. "I agree, Chancellor," he said, coming around the fountain and lightly placing one hand on his Padawan's shoulder. "Anakin will make a fine Jedi some day, we're all certain of it. Of course, he does have a bit of problem with controlâ€¦"

"_Master,_" Anakin winced in anguish, and Obi-Wan chuckled. Nothing

in his stance or bearing gave away the hatred and rage he felt towards the Sith lord.

With narrowed eyes, Palpatine looked between the two of them, seeking, seeking. Anakin saw that look, and shuddered deeply, but he didn't know why. Having his Master's hand on him both helped and hindered his tumbling emotions, and for some reason all he could think of was the adoring look on Padme's face as she looked at his Master.

Abruptly, Palpatine stood, flicking imaginary dust from the rich fabric of his clothes. "Well, I have managed to shirk duty for long enough, I suppose. I must go back to work. It's been a pleasure, my boy, to speak with you. Don't forget what I've said now. Good day to both of you, I hope we'll be meeting again."

Smiling genially, Obi-Wan said, "oh, I'm certain of it, Chancellor." He bowed, motioning for Anakin to mimic him. "I'm quite certain we'll meet again. Come along, Anakin, we're wanted inside."

On the way back to the council chambers, Anakin was thoroughly confused. His Master's aura had never seemed so bleak, and the strange sense of discomfort he got from Palpatine seemed to have transferred to Obi-Wan. When he tried to ask a question, Obi-Wan just shushed him, then looked at him and smiled. "Sorry, Ani. We've got to get to the council chambers. You'll understand then what's going on."

In the meantime, Mace and Acleisst had collected Yoda and two others, and had called an emergency council meeting. To their surprise, Ki Adi Mundi had returned from Coruscant, along with the rest of the council. Acleisst and Mace shared a long look at that information, confirming fears until now hoped groundless.

As Obi-Wan and Anakin came into the room, Acleisst was rapidly filling in the others on what had happened before, explaining about the Sith attack on Anakin. To Ani's surprise, she did not even mention Padme, and he puzzled why she would omit the girl from the story.

Ki Adi Mundi was leaning forward anxiously, hanging on her every word. When she had finished, he said, "of course, you now know who the Sith is then, don't you, Cless?" Anakin frowned at the strange eagerness displayed by the white haired master.

Acleisst was unperturbed. "At the time, no, Ki; he was strong enough to hide his identity to me." Ki leaned back in his chair at these words. Outwardly, he seemed disappointed, but there was a gleam of satisfaction in his eyes that Acleisst did not miss. "However," she said, and he leaned forward again, wary. "I knew he was on the planet, and probably here in Theed, which is why we returned."

"It's Chancellor Palpatine. He's the Sith."

There were gasps around the room as the council absorbed these words, delivered in a flat, unemotional tone. Ki's eyes widened and his mouth dropped open in shock, but his eyes did not lose their wariness. "Are you certain, Cless?" he asked. "This is a dangerous accusation to make against such a strong man."

"Dangerous, Ki?" she asked softly. "Strange way of putting it. Yes, I'm quite certain. As soon as I saw him I knew." The two of them locked eyes for a moment of silent struggle; then Ki blanched and fell back in his chair.

As if he hadn't noticed, Mace spoke. "This, of course, changes everything. We know we killed his apprentice, and hopefully he's been too busy to take another. We need consensus on what to do next."

"What consensus?" cried Adi Gallia. "He's a Sith! He must be eliminated!"

There were murmurs of agreement, but Yoda held up his claw. "Sith he may be, yes, but Chancellor is he too. Great in power is he, political power. Other methods open to us must there be."

The argument raged back and forth for some time. Anakin, meanwhile, had settled into a corner of the room. He hugged his knees to his chest, glad for once to be ignored. Over and over again, his brain struggled with the idea of Chancellor Palpatine being a Sith. It simply didn't add up. Could Acleisst be wrong? It seemed impossible.

Finally, Acleisst, who had not participated in the arguments at all, stood and motioned for silence. "Since we can't seem to come to an agreement on what should be done, it appears that we must needs do nothing. As it has been pointed out to me on many an occasion," and here she nodded, smiling slightly, to Saesee Tiin, "doing nothing is, in itself, a choice. I suggest we watch, and wait."

This idea was met with mutterings and sighing, but overall grudging acceptance. She continued. "The enemy you know is much safer than the enemy you don't. Obi-Wan and I need to take Anakin to Coruscant to finish his training; that will present us with an excellent way of keeping close tabs on the Chancellor."

Ki, who also hadn't participated much in the debate, spoke up diffidently. "That's all well and good, Cless, but what about the Queen?"

Acleisst stared at him blankly. "What about the Queen, Ki?" she asked, her tone puzzled.

Ki seemed confused at her reply. "Well, uh, don't you think she's in danger here? If Palpatine is really this Sith, thenâ€!"

Frowning, Acleisst shook her head. "I fail to see the relevance. The Queen of Naboo should be perfectly able to take care of herself. Why should we Jedi interfere? Are you suggesting we should share our knowledge of the Sith's identity with Naboo?"

"No, no, of course not, this is an internal Jedi matter," Ki said quickly. He subsided, a puzzled smile on his face.

"Then agreed are we?" Yoda asked.

Eeth Koth leaned forward. "Cless, do you intend to take that young female with you to Coruscant? What was her name, Padme?"

Anakin, who was already shocked by the off-hand way Acleisst dismissed "the Queen," was even more surprised when she answered, "no, I see no reason to. She is much too old to have been trained adequately to become a full Jedi. Our time together has given her a measure of control and enough knowledge to repel the Sith should he try for her, and that should be enough."

The rest of the meeting passed in a haze of confusion and distress for Anakin. He felt as if his whole world had been turned upside-down and sideways with the revelations he had heard. He wasn't aware of the council departing, all but his Masters and Yoda and Mace, until Obi-Wan approached him.

The boy was sitting with his back to the wall, and Obi-Wan could feel as well as see his anguish by the tears falling down his face. "What is Ani?" he asked gently, squatting before his Padawan.

"Are we really going to leave Padme here, where Palpatine could get to her?" asked Anakin softly, wiping his eyes on his sleeve.

Obi-Wan smiled, and helped Ani to his feet. "Wait, Anakin, wait and see."

Once the last of the other council members were well away, Mace opened a door leading to an anteroom. To Anakin's shock, in came Captain Panaka and Padme. Both had stunned expressions, and Padme immediately ran to Acleisst, hugging her tight.

"Heard, did you?" Yoda asked the two, who nodded mutely. "Agree, do you now?"

Panaka shook his head, unable to completely digest what he had overheard. "I can't believe it, your Highness. Palpatine? I just can't believe it."

"Believe it, Panaka," Mace's voice was bleak. "It's pretty obvious what's going on here now, don't you think? If he even suspects we're on to him, Amidala will be at risk."

"We just can't leave Padme here with him," Anakin burst out. Padme turned to him and smiled through her tears, wrenching at his heart.

"We won't, Ani," Acleisst reassured him. "We can't."

"Then why did you say that to the council, Aunt Leia?" Anakin demanded.

Acleisst sighed. "I said it because we have a traitor on the council, Anakin. The only people who can know what we do now are the seven of us, no others. Palpatine will know that we're on to him, but hopefully he does not know that we are aware of his plans for Amidala."

She turned to Panaka. "You do understand now, don't you? If you want to keep your Queen alive and free, she must leave the planet."

Panaka's head continued to shake slowly back and forth. "How can you ask me to do this?" he cried. "I'm loyal to my Queen and my planet.

Conspiring like this is treason!"

Padme went to him and laid a hand on his arm. "Captain, you are a loyalist. Your strength has been like a rock foundation to me. But I need you now to set aside your loyalty to the planet and think about me. I would sooner die than fall under the sway of the Sith."

The Captain searched her face for a moment, then gave in. "All the Gods help me," he said softly, "but I agree with you. What can I do to help?"

Obi-Wan reached out and squeezed Panaka's shoulder in sympathy over the man's dilemma. "You're doing the right thing," he said softly.

Mace and Acleisst were staring at each other; there was anguish on Acleisst's face as she said, "I think Alderaan would be goodâ€œ|the Organa family has always been close to the Jedi and will shelter us."

"This means, you realize," Mace said, his voice twisted in agony as he realized the pain it was causing her, "that you and Obi-Wan will have to split up. You should take Amidala to Alderaan, while he goes to Coruscant with Anakin."

"NO!" the exclamation ripped from Obi-Wan before he could stop it. It was Panaka's turn to lay a comforting hand on his friend's shoulder. Acleisst's eyes closed rather than look at her lover.

"It has to be this way," she said quietly.

Clearing his throat, Panaka said, "how are we going to accomplish this? If Palpatine discovers the real Queen is missing, he'll find her no matter what deception we use."

Anakin could no longer stand the pain in the room, between his own at the thought of losing Padme and that of his two Masters at leaving each other. In his effort to avoid the pain, he came up with a frenzied idea. "Assassinate her," he said, in a frantic tone.

The others in the room turned to him in surprise. "You know, assassinate her," he continued. "It doesn't have to be real, but if everyone thinks she's dead, well, there shouldn't be a problem, right?"

"Out of the mouths of babies," murmured Mace, smiling at Anakin. "An excellent plan, son. Qui-Gon must have been right about you after all."

The praise was meant to make him feel better, but it didn't.

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epilogue

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A small ship sped through space, roughly halfway from Naboo to Coruscant, when it fell out of hyperspace. Aboard, beside the two

pilots, were two Jedi, a Padawan, and a former Queen. As far as Palpatine and the other members of the council knew, Amidala was dead and Obi-Wan, Acleisst and Anakin were on their way to Coruscant. Naboo was in a frenzy of election fever over the dozens of candidates for new monarch.

The ship rendezvoused with another in space, long before Coruscant was reached; the two ships docked and luggage was transferred. All that was left was good-byes, the hardest part.

Anakin helped Padme with the last of her belongings to the other ship, then turned to go. "Ani," said Padme softly. He turned back, but wouldn't look at her; his hold over his emotions was too tenuous.

"Do you remember this?" she asked, holding out the japoorn snippet necklace she always wore.

His lower lip trembling, Anakin nodded. "I gave it to you for luck," he said, his voice cracking. "I guess I should have made one for me too, huh."

"You won't need it," she said, her own voice trembling with repressed emotion. "You've always made your own luck, remember? You're going to be a Jedi some day, and now all I am is a person who used to be a queen."

"Oh, Pad, don't," he cried, taking her hand in his. "You'll always be a Queen to me, don't you know that? Always."

Tearfully they regarded each other. Swiftly, she closed the space between them and kissed him on the lips, then turned and fled to her stateroom. Anakin, shocked, stood frozen for a moment, still feeling the softness of her lips on his, her anguished face forever burned into his memory. Blindly, he stumbled back into his own ship.

Obi-Wan and Acleisst stood together in the room they had shared to this point, locked in one last embrace. "This is too much," muttered Obi-Wan, pressing her wonderful body to his, "I can't do it. Please, let us come with you and the Sith be damned. We've only had a week together, Cless!"

Her head buried in his shoulder, she laughed, a high-pitched frantic thing. "Listen to yourself, my love. We can't do that. Yoda is right, we serve the Force and this is our path."

She pulled back away from him, her delicate hands holding his head and her glorious eyes locked to his. "We're joined now, Obi-Wan Kenobi, mind and soul. I am a part of you as you are a part of me. Wherever you go, I shall be there. Wherever I am, you will be."

Holding to each other tightly, their mouths met in one last crushing kiss. Then, reluctantly, they parted, she shouldering a small carry-on and moving through the airlock to the other ship without a backwards glance. He watched her go, watched the airlock doors close, and through a porthole window, watched the other ship streak away and enter hyperspace.

"Sir?" said the pilot tentatively. "Shall we depart for Coruscant?"

Not trusting his voice, Obi-Wan Kenobi nodded. Anakin came up to join him in the control room as the pilot launched their ship into hyperspace. "Will we ever see them again, Master?" he asked quietly, ignoring the tears that ran down his face.

Obi-Wan couldn't answer. Instead, he put his arm around his student's shoulders as they watched the lonely stars streak by.

end

End
file.